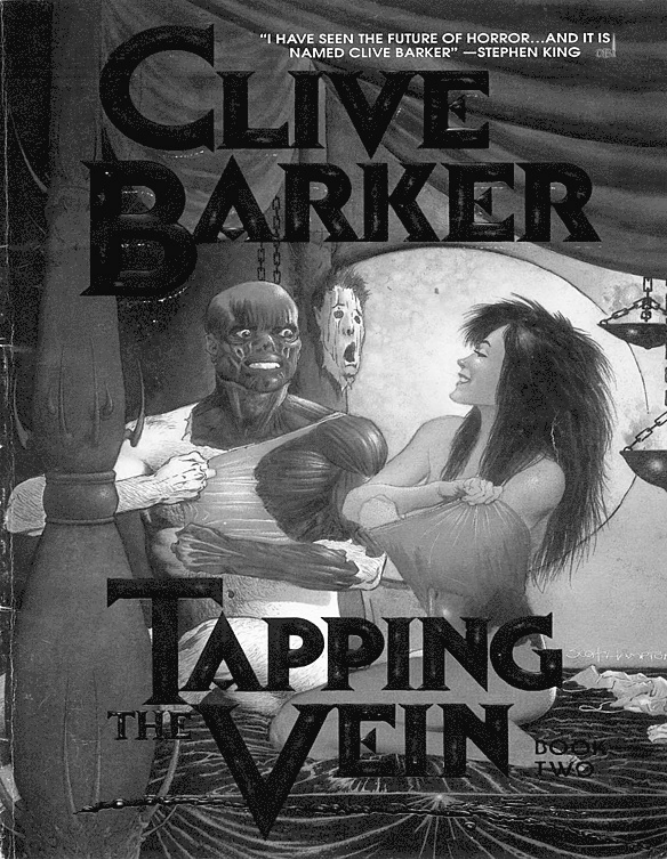


VISIT...

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"I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE OF HORROR...AND IT IS
NAMED CLIVE BARKER" —STEPHEN KING

CLIVE BARKER



TAPPING THE VEIN

BOOK
TWO



TAPPING VEIN

TITAN  BOOKS

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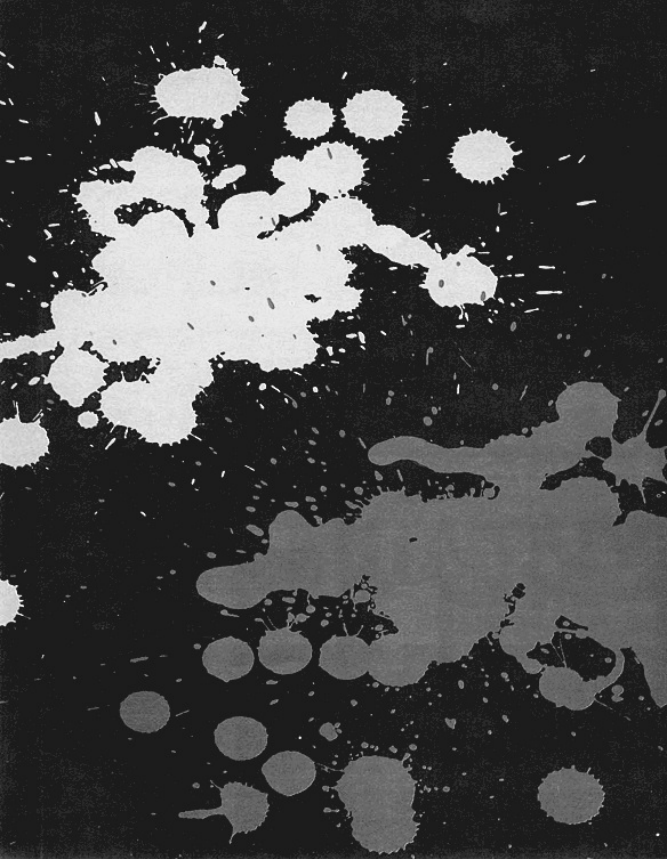
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SKINS OF THE FATHERS
Illustrated by Klaus Janson
Adapted by Chuck Wagner
and Fred Burke
Lettered by Bill Pearson



IN THE HILLS, THE CITIES
Illustrated by John Bolton
Adapted by Chuck Wagner
and Fred Burke
Lettered by Wayne Truman



RRRRrrrr

THE CAR COUGHED
AND CHOKED
AND DIED.

JESUS!

DAVIDSON WAS SUDDENLY AWARE
OF THE WIND ON THE DESERT
ROAD. AS IT KEENED AT THE
WINDOWS OF HIS MUSTANG. HE
TRIED TO REVIVE THE ENGINE,
BUT IT REFUSED LIFE.

HE THREW UP THE HOOD
OF THE CAR AND PEERED
HOPELESSLY INSIDE, RE-
GRETTING HIS LACK OF
MECHANICAL KNOW-HOW.

WHY
DON'T THEY
MAKE THE DAMN
THINGS
FOOLPROOF?!

IN EVERY DIRECTION, HOT AIR, HOT ROCK,
HOT SAND.

THIS WAS ARIZONA.

IN FRONT AND BEHIND, THE BAKING
DUST HIGHWAY STRETCHED UNBENEFICENTLY
TO THE PALE HORIZON. IF HE NARROWED
HIS EYES HE COULD JUST MAKE OUT THE
MOUNTAINS, BUT AS SOON AS HE ATTEMPTED
TO FIX HIS FOCUS, THEY WERE EATEN
UP BY THE HEAT HAZE.

ALREADY THE SUN WAS
CORRODING THE TOP OF
HIS HEAD WHERE HIS
BLOND HAIR WAS THINNING.

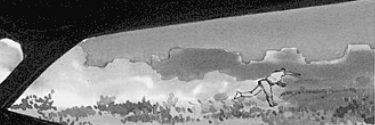
THEN HE
HEARD THE
MUSIC.

IT WAS SO FAR OFF IT
SOUNDED LIKE A WHISTLING
IN HIS EARS AT FIRST,
BUT IT BECAME LOUDER.

LIKE THE WIND THROUGH
TELEPHONE LINES, A
SOURCELESS, RHYTHMLESS,
NEARLESS AIR-WAVE
PLUCKING AT THE HAIRS
ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK
AND TELLING THEM TO
STAND. HE TRIED TO
JOCKEY IT, BUT IT
WOULDN'T GO AWAY.

ONLY AS HE SCANNED THE DESERT
TO THE SOUTHEAST DID A LINE
OF TINY FIGURES BECOME VISIBLE
TO HIM. WALKING, OR SCIPPING,
OR DANCING AT THE FURTHEST
EDGE OF HIS SIGHT, LIQUID IN THE
HEAT OFF THE EARTH, THE PRO-
CESSION, IF THAT WAS ITS NATURE,
WAS LONG, AND MAKING ITS WAY
ACROSS THE DESERT PARALLEL
TO THE HIGHWAY.

THEIR PATHS
WOULD NOT
CROSS.



HE NEEDED HELP! NO DOUBT OF IT, BUT ALREADY THEY WERE RECEIVING FROM HIM. HE BROKE INTO A RUN.



OVER THE THUNDER OF HIS BLOOD, HE COULD HEAR THE MUSIC MORE LOUDLY NOW. THERE WAS NO MURDOY APPARENT, BUT A CONSTANT RISING AND FALLING OF MANY INSTRUMENTS: HOWLS AND HUMMINGS, WHISTLINGS, DRUMMINGS AND ROARINGS.



THE HEAD OF THE PROCESSION HAD NOW DISAPPEARED, RECEIVED INTO DISTANCE, BUT THE CELEBRANTS (IN THAT THEY WERE) STILL PARADED FAST. HE CHANGED DIRECTION A LITTLE, TO HEAD THEM OFF, GLANCING OVER HIS SHOULDER BRIEFLY TO CHECK HIS WAY BACK.



WITH A STOMACH-CHURNING SENSE OF LONELINESS HE SAW HIS VEHICLE AS SMALL AS A BEETLE ON THE ROAD BEHIND HIM, SIFTING WEIGHTED DOWN BY A BOILING SKY.



HE BEGAN TO SEE THE PROCESSION MORE CLEARLY THOUGH ITS LEADERS WERE WELL OUT OF SIGHT. IT WAS, HE BEGAN TO BELIEVE, A CARNIVAL OF SOME SORT EXTRAORDINARY AS THAT SEEMED OUT HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF GOD'S NOWHERE.



THE DANCERS WORE HEADDRESSES AND MARKS THAT TOTTERED WELL ABOVE HUMAN HEIGHT — THERE WAS THE FLUTTER OF BRIGHTLY COLORED FEATHERS, AND STREAMERS COILING IN THE AIR BEHIND THEM.



WHATEVER THE REASON FOR THE CELEBRATION THEY REELED LIKE DRUNKARDS, LOPING ONE MOMENT, LEAPING THE NEXT, SQUIRRELING, SOME OF THEM ON THE GROUND, BELLIES TO THE HOT SAND.



STOP!



AT FIRST THERE WAS NO RESPONSE. THEN, THROUGH THE SPLITS OF HIS EYES, HE THOUGHT HE SAW ONE OR TWO OF THE REVELLERS HALT.



SOME OF THE INSTRUMENTS HAD DIED AWAY, AS THOUGH WORD OF HIS PRESENCE WAS SPREADING AMONG THEM. THEY'D DEFINITELY SEEN HIM, NO DOUBT OF THAT. HE WALKED ON, FASTER NOW, AND OUT OF THE MAZE THE DETAILS OF THE PROCESSION BEGAN TO COME CLEAR.



MY JESUS!

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS THIRTY-SIX GODLESS YEARS, THE WORDS WERE A TRUE PRAYER.

WE STOOD ONE HALF A
MILE FROM THEM, BUT
THERE WAS NO MISTAKING
WHAT WE SAW. HIS RECHING
EYES KNEW PAPER-MACHE
FROM FLESH. ILLUSION
FROM MISSENABLE REALITY.

AROOOOOOO

SKIN OF THE FATHERS

ILLUSTRATED BY
KLAUS JANSON

SKWEEEEEEEE

ONE OF THE THINGS BEGAN TO SCREAM LIKE A WHISTLE.

UNCONTROLLABLE PAUL SWEET THROUEN HIM, AND DAVIDSON FELT HIS TROUSERS FILL AS HIS BOWELS FAILED HIM.

THE THING WAS RUSHING TOWARD HIM WITH THE SPEED OF A CHEETAH. ITS ALIEN ANATOMY GROWING CLEARER EVERY SECOND. EVEN ITS GENITALS EXPOSED -- TWO-PRONGED AND BEATING AGAINST ITS ABDOMEN. (GOD HELP ME, THOUGHT DAVIDSON) WITH LUST.

EEYAAH!

DAVIDSON SHRIEKED A SHRIEK THAT WAS ALMOST THE EQUAL OF THE MONSTER'S NOISE AND FLED BACK THE WAY HE HAD COME.

IN THAT MOMENT HE REALIZED NOW CLOSE DEATH WAS, NOW CLOSE IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN, AND HE LONGED FOR A MOMENT'S COMPREHENSION OF THIS INST HORROR.

AS HE HEARD THE THUD OF ITS FEET AT HIS BACK, HE INSTINCTIVELY Huddled INTO A BALL OF HYPERTENSIVE FLESH AND AWAITED THE COUP DE GRACE.

DAVIDSON FELT HIS EXCREMENT AND HIS EGGS. HE FELT CURIOUSLY IGNORED. BEHIND HIM THE PARADE HAD MOVED ON.

WHEEEEEET

THE WHISTLING NOW CHANGED PITCH. THE NOISE WAS ALL BUT OUTSIDE HIS HEARING RANGE. JUST A SHRILL WHINE AT THE BACK OF HIS Aching HEAD.



ITS HEAD WAS THROWN BACK IN A KIND OF ECSTASY, ITS REACTION PLAINER THAN EVER, A FINAL SWOOP IN ITS VOICE TAKING THE WHISTLE OUT OF HUMAN HEARING.



TO HIS NOSTRILS DRIFTED THE UNMISTAKABLE STENCH OF GAROLINE.

DAVIDSON BRIEFLY WONDERED WHAT HE COULD POSSIBLY PUT ON THE INSURANCE FORM.



THE THING DID NOT CALL OUT, OR IF IT DID, ITS ACCENTS WERE BEYOND HEARING.



THE SHIT ON DAVIDSON'S LEGS WAS ALREADY DRY IN THE HEAT. THE MUSIC HAD GONE ENTIRELY, AS HAD THE PROCESSION.

HE WAS BLANK-EYED WHEN THE NEXT VEHICLE ALONG THE HIGHWAY STOPPED TO PICK HIM UP.



MILES AWAY, SHERIFF JOSH PACKARD STARED IN DISBELIEF AT THE CLAW PRINTS ON THE GROUND AT HIS FEET. THEY WERE PUNCHED IN SLOWLY AS THE LIQUID FLESH OF THE DYING MONSTER THAT HAD RUN THROUGH THE MAIN STREET (THE ONLY STREET) OF WELCOME MINUTES AGO.



THE NORMAL BUSINESS OF WELCOME, THE TRADING, THE DEBATING, THE NOW DO YOU DO'S HAD HALTED.

THE STENCH WAS SOMETHING BETWEEN OVER-COOKED MEAT AND AN EXHUMATION, AND IT OFFENDED PACKARD. THIS WAS HIS TOWN OVERLOOKED BY HIM, PROTECTED BY HIM. THE ATTRACTION OF THIS FIREBALL WAS NOT LOOKED UPON KINDLY.

ONE OR TWO NAUSEOUS INDIVIDUALS HAD BEEN RECEIVED INTO THE LOBBY OF THE HOTEL WHILE THE SABLED PRICASSUED FLESH THICKENED THE GOOD DESERT AIR OF THE TOWN.



THIS WAS A MONSTER; NO DOUBT OF IT.

ONCE EVERY GENERATION OR SO, HIS FATHER HAD TOLD HIM, THE DESERT SPAT OUT ITS DEMONS AND LET THEM LOOSE AWHILE 'TIL NOW, HE'D NEVER BELIEVED IT.



CYU!

THE CROWD, STILL LINGERING IN THE SAFETY OF THE DOORWAYS, COOED WITH ADMIRATION AT HIS BRAVERY, THAT KICK ALONG WOULD BE WORTH A NIGHT OF DRINKS, PERHAPS EVEN A WOMAN.



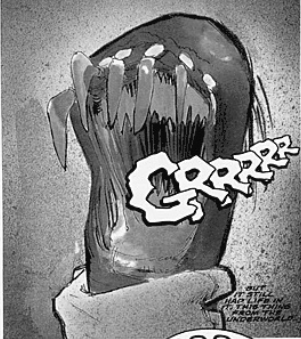
WITH THE DIS-PASSIONATE GAZE OF A PROFESSIONAL PENON-KICKER, PACKARD SCRUTINIZED THE TANGLED MESS.

IT WAS QUITE DEAD, THAT WAS OBVIOUS.



SET A CAMERA OUT HERE, SEDERIAN!

PACKARD IMPRESSED EVEN HIMSELF.



HELENE KOOKER DROPPED THE BARREL OF THE SHOTGUN SHE HAD JUST FIRED, AND GRANTED WITH SATISFACTION.



MONSTERS, PACKARD REMEMBERED HIS FATHER TELLING HIM, NEVER DIE. HE'D REMEMBERED TOO LATE, AND NOW HE'D SACRIFICED HIS HAND, HIS DRINKING, SEXING HAND.

A WAVE OF NOSTALGIA FOR LOST YEARS IN THOSE FINGERS WASHED OVER HIM, WHILE PAIN BURST INTO DARKNESS BEFORE HIS EYES.

THE SHACK AT THE BACK OF THE HOUSE -- FROM THE GOINGS-ON IN WELCOME -- WAS LUCY'S REFUGE, AND ALWAYS HAD BEEN. WHEN EUGENE CAME BACK DRUNK FROM WELCOME, OR A SUDDEN FURY TOOK HIM BECAUSE THE STEW WAS COLD, LUCY RETIRED INTO THE SHACK WHERE SHE COULD WEEP IN PEACE.

THERE WAS NO PITY TO BE HAD IN LUCY'S LIFE, NONE FROM EUGENE CERTAINLY, AND PRECIOUS LITTLE TIME TO PITY HERSELF.

TODAY, THE OLD SOURCE OF IRRITATION HAD GOT EUGENE INTO A RAGE --

--THE CHILD.

THE NURTURED AND CAREFULLY CULTIVATED CHILD OF THEIR LOVE, NAMED AFTER THE BROTHER OF MOSES, AARON, WHICH MEANT 'RECALLED ONE.'

A SWEET BOY, THE PRETTIEST BOY IN THE WHOLE TERRITORY, FIVE YEARS OLD AND ALREADY AS CHARMING AND POLITE AS ANY EAST COAST MOMMA COULD WISH TO RAISE.

AARON.

LUCY'S PRIDE AND JOY, A CHILD FIT TO BLOW BUBBLES IN A PICTURE BOOK, FIT TO SMILE, FIT TO CHARM THE DEVIL HIMSELF.

THAT WAS EUGENE'S OBJECTION.

THAT FUCKING CHILD'S NO MORE A BOY THAN YOU ARE. HE'S NOT EVEN A HALF-BOY, HE'S ONLY FIT FOR PUTTING IN FANCY SHOES AND SELLING PERFUME, OR A PREACHER -- HE'S FIT FOR A PREACHER.

YOU'RE A SHAME TO YOUR FATHER.

YOU HEAR ME, BOY?

EUGENE LOOKED AWAY. THE BOY'S BIG EYES MADE HIM SMILE TO HIS STOMACH, MORE LIKE A DOG'S EYES THAN ANYTHING HUMAN.

I WANT HIM OUT OF THIS HOUSE.

WHAT'S HE DONE?

HE DOESN'T NEED TO DO A THING. IT'S SUPPERFICIAL HE'S THE WAY HE IS. THEY LAUGH AT ME, BECAUSE OF HIM.

IF THEY LAUGH, THEY DON'T LAUGH AT THE BOY. THEY LAUGH AT YOU, TALKING ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE SEEN AND WHAT YOU'RE SCARED OF --



BUT THE BOY WASN'T AFRAID. THE WHIPPING
THAT WOULD BE METED OUT TO HIM WOULD
PAIN HIM, BUT THIS WAS NOT TRUE FEAR.

YOU'RE
SICKLY,
LAD. WEAK
AND SICKLY
LIKE A RUNTY
HOG.

IF I WAS
A FARMER
AND YOU WERE
A HOG, YOU
KNOW WHAT
I'D DO?

NO,
PAPA,
WHAT
WOULD
YOU DO?

SKRRRKK

WHY, I'D
CUT YOU UP AND
FEED YOU TO THE
REST OF THE LITTER.
NOTHING A HOG
LIKES BETTER TO
EAT THAN HOG-
MEAT. HOW'D YOU
LIKE THAT?

NO,
PAPA.

YOU
WOULDN'T
LIKE
THAT?

NO
THANK YOU,
PAPA.

WELL, I'D
LIKE TO SEE THAT
AARON. I'D LIKE TO
SEE WHAT YOU'D DO
IF I WAS TO OPEN YOU
UP AND HAVE A
LOOK INSIDE
YOU.

THERE WAS A
NEW VIOLENCE
IN HIS FATHER'S
GAMES WHICH
AARON COULDN'T
UNDERSTAND:
NEW THREATS,
NEW INTIMACY.

UNCOMFORTABLE AS HE WAS, THE BOY
KNEW THE REAL FEAR WAS FELT NOT
BY HIM, BUT BY HIS FATHER: FEAR
WAS EUGENE'S BIRTHRIGHT; JUST AS
IT WAS AARON'S TO WATCH, AND WAIT,
AND SUFFER UNTIL THE MOMENT CAME.

HE KNEW (WITHOUT UNDER-
STANDING HOW OR WHY)
THAT HE WOULD BE AN
INSTRUMENT IN THE
DESTRUCTION OF HIS
FATHER. MAYBE MORE
THAN AN INSTRUMENT.

ANGER
BURSTED IN
EUGENE. THE BOY
WAS HIS RUIN,
SOMEHOW. HE'D
KILLED THE GOOD LIFE
THEY'D LIVED
BEFORE HE
WAS BORN.
AS SURELY
AS HE HAD
KNOCKED HIS
PARENTS'
DREAM.

I COULD
KILL YOU, BOY.
WHAT DO YOU
SAY TO
THAT?

NOTHING,
SIR.

YOU
SHOULD SAY
THANK YOU,
SIR.

WHY?

WHY, BOY?
'CAUSE THIS LIFE'S NOT
WORTH WHAT A HOG CAN SHIT,
AND TO BE DOING YOU A LOVING
SERVICE, AS A FATHER
SHOULD A SON.

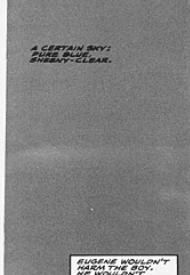
YES,
SIR.



IN THE SHAKE BEHIND THE HOUSE, LUCY HAD STOPPED CRYING.



THERE WAS NO PURPOSE IN IT, AND BESIDES, SOMETHING IN THE SKY SHE COULD SEE THROUGH THE HOLES IN THE ROOF HAD BROUGHT ANGRAGES TO HER THAT WIPE THE TEARS AWAY.



A CERTAIN SKY: PURE BLUE, SPARKY-CLEAR.

EUGENE WOULDN'T HARM THE BOY. HE WOULDN'T CARE, EVER DARE, HARM THAT CHILD. HE KNEW WHAT THE BOY WAS, THOUGH HE'D NEVER ADMIT TO IT.



SHE REMEMBERED THE DAY, SIX YEARS AGO NOW, WHEN THE SKY HAD BEEN SPARKY-LIKE TODAY, AND THE AIR HAD BEEN LIVID WITH THE HEAT.

EUGENE WOULD PLEASURE HER ALL DAY AND ALL NIGHT SOMETIMES. THE DESERT MADE A RIND RED, AND THEY COULD LIE UNINTER- RUPTED BENEATH THE WIDE SKY.



THAT DAY SIX YEARS AGO THE SKY HAD DARKENED TOO SOON, LONG BEFORE NIGHT WAS DUE.

SHE HAD SEEN, OVER HIS SHOULDER, THE SHAPE THE SKY HAD TAKEN: THE VAST AND MONUMENTAL CREATURES THAT WERE WATCHING THEM.

HE, IN HIS PASSION, STILL WORKED AT HER THROAT TO HIS ROOT AND OUT THE LENGTH AGAIN AS HE KNEW SHE DELIGHTED IN. TIL A HAND THE COLOR OF BEETS AND THE SIZE OF A MAN PINCHED HIS NECK, AND FLUDED HIM OUT OF HIS WIFE'S LAP.



SHE WATCHED HIM LIFTED INTO THE SKY LIKE A SQUIRMING JACK-RABBIT, SPITTING FROM TWO MOUTHS, NORTH AND SOUTH, AS HE FINISHED HIS THRUSTS ON THE AIR.



THEN HIS EYES OPENED FOR A MOMENT, AND HE SAW HIS WIFE TWENTY FEET BELOW HIM, STILL BARE, STILL SPREAD BUTTERFLY WIDE, WITH MONSTERS ON EVERY SIDE, CASUALLY WITHOUT MALICE, THEY THREW HIM AWAY, OUT OF THEIR KING OF ADMIRATION, AND OUT OF HER SIGHT.



SHE REMEMBERED SO WELL THE HOUR THAT FOLLOWED THE EMBRACES OF THE MONSTERS. NOT FOUL IN ANY WAY, NOT CROSS OR HARMFUL, NEVER LESS THAN LOVING.



EVEN THE MACHINERIES OF REPRODUCTION THAT THEY PIERCED HER WITH, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, WERE NOT PAINFUL, THOUGH SOME WERE AS LARGE AS EUGENE'S FISTED ARM, AND HARD AS BONE.

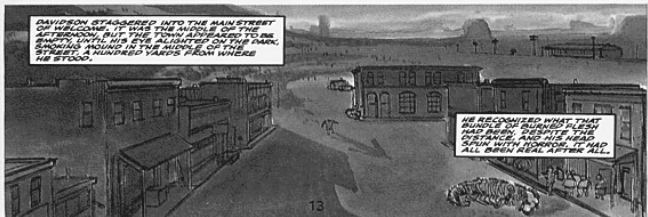


HOW MANY OF THOSE STRANGERS TOOK HER THAT AFTERNOON—THREE, FOUR, FIVE? MINGLING THEIR SEMEN IN HER BODY, FONDLY TEASING JOY FROM HER WITH THEIR PATIENT THRUSTS.



WHEN THEY WENT AWAY, AND HER SKIN WAS TOUCHED WITH SUNLIGHT AGAIN, SHE FELT, THOUGH ON REFLECTION IT SEEMED SHAMEFUL, A LOSS, AS THOUGH THE ZENITH OF HER LIFE WAS PASSED, AND THE REST OF HER DAYS WOULD BE A COLD RIDE DOWN TO DEATH.

SHE HOPED, AND HOPE IT WAS, THAT THERE WOULD BE FRUIT FROM THE SEED OF THAT DAY'S LOVE, AND IT WOULD BE A KEEPSAKE OF HER JOY.





HE STUMBLERD ON A COUPLE MORE STEPS, FIGHTING THE DIZZINESS AND LOSING, UNTIL HE FELT HIMSELF SUPPORTED BY STRONG ARMS, AND HEARD, THROUGH A FLOOD OF HEAD-NOISES, REASSURING WORDS BEING SPOKEN TO HIM. THEY MADE NO SENSE, BUT AT LEAST THEY WERE SOFT AND HUMAN! HE COULD GIVE UP ANY PRETENSE TO CONSCIOUSNESS.



IT SEEMED THERE WAS ONLY A MOMENT OF RESPIRE BEFORE THE WORLD CAME BACK INTO VIEW AGAIN, AS ODIOUS AS EVER.

HE'LL SURVIVE.



DRINK, THEN TELL US WHAT YOU GOT TO TELL.

THE ROOM WAS FILLED WITH PEOPLE; IT WAS AS THOUGH ALL OF HELLGANG WAS PRESSING INTO THE KNOCKED FRONT PARLOR, QUITE AN AUDIENCE! BUT THEN, IT WAS QUITE A TALK, SOOED BY THE WHISKY. HE BEGAN TO TELL IT AS BEST HE COULD, WITHOUT SHIRLISHMENT, JUST LETTING THE WORDS COME...



IN RETURN, ELEANOR RELATED THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF SHERIFF PACKARD'S "ACCIDENT."

IT'S NOT THE ONLY DEVIL OUT THERE.

SO'S YOU SAY.

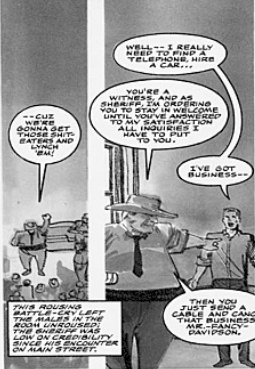
MY PAPA SAID SO, AND I BELIEVE, SURE AS HELL I BELIEVE IT!

THEN WE'D BEST DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!



WHAT'S TO BE DONE ABOUT THE LIKES OF A THING THAT BATS AUTOMOBILES?

I THINK WE SHOULD LIE LOW AND LET 'EM PASS.



AND WHAT OF THE
DEMONS? THEY HAD
COME UPON THE HOUSE
QUIETLY, NOT INTENDING
TO CREEP, JUST SO
GENTLE WITH THEIR
TREAD NOBODY
HEARD THEM.

AARON DIDN'T
NEED TO LOOK
UP TO SEE THEM
COMING ACROSS
THE SAND; THEIR
APPROACH SOUNDED
IN HIS VEINS.

WHAROOOOOSH

WHAT'S
WRONG
WITH THE
WINDOW
BOY?

BUT AARON ONLY HEARD
ONE OF HIS TRUE FATHERS'
VOICES BECAUSE EUGENE'S
MUMBLINGS, HIS VOICE
SOUNDED LIKE A RUSH
OF WATER, COUNTER-
POINTED BY SOFT,
PIPING SOUNDS.

IT WAS AN
EAGER VOICE,
A LOVING
VOICE.

ALL AT ONCE
EUGENE SEEMED
TO UNDERSTAND.

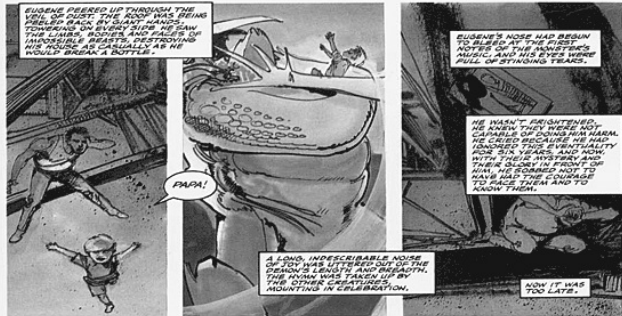
PAPA!

EUGENE TOOK THE CRY
AS ADDRESSED TO
HIMSELF, BUT AARON'S
TRUE FATHER ALSO
HEARD THE BOY'S
VOICE. HIS ANSWERING
CALL WAS THREADED
WITH PIERCING
NOTES OF CONCERN.

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, LUCY HAD
HEARD THE EXCHANGE OF VOICES.
SHE CAME OUT OF THE PROTECTION
OF HER SHACK, KNOWING WHAT
SHE'D SEE AGAINST THAT SHEEN-
ING SKY, BUT NO LESS DRAINED
BY THE MONUMENTAL CREATURES
THAT HAD GATHERED ON EVERY
SIDE OF THE HOUSE.

PAPA!

AN ANGUISH WENT THROUGH HER, REMEM-
BERING THE LAST TIME OF THAT DAY &
YEARS PREVIOUS. THEY WERE ALL THERE,
THE UNFORGETTABLE CREATURES, AN
INCALCULABLE SELECTION OF MONKS. AT
THE DOOR STOOD THE CREATURE LUCY
REMEMBERED WITH GREATEST AFFECTION;
THE ONE WHO HAD FIRST TOUCHED HER.
FIRST SPOOLED HER TEARS. FIRST
ENTERED HER, INFINITELY GENTLY.



EUGENE PEERED UP THROUGH THE VEIL OF DUST. THE ROOF WAS BEING PULLED BACK BY GIANT HANDS. TOWERING ON EVERY SIDE HE SAW THE LABS, ROBOTS AND FLOCKS OF IMPOSSIBLE BEASTS, DESTROYING HIS HOUSE AS CASUALTY AS HE WOULD BREAK A BUTTLE.

PAPA!

A LONG, INDESCRIBABLE NOISE OF JOY WAS UTTERED OUT OF THE DEMON'S LENGTH AND BREADTH. THE NYM WAS TAKEN UP BY THE OTHER CREATURES, MOUNTING IN CELEBRATION.

EUGENE'S NOSE HAD BEGUN TO BLEED AT THE FIRST NOTES OF THE MONSTER'S MUSIC. HIS EYES WERE FULL OF STINGING TEARS.

HE WASN'T FRIGHTENED. HE KNEW THEY WERE NOT CAPABLE OF DOING HIM HARM. HE CRIED BECAUSE HE HAD LONGED THIS EVENTUALITY FOR SIX YEARS. AND NOW, WITH THEIR MYSTERY AND THEIR GLORY IN FRONT OF HIM, HE COULDN'T HAVE HAD THE COURAGE TO FACE THEM AND TO KNOW THEM.

NOW IT WAS TOO LATE.



LEAVING EUGENE TO HIS RUINS, LUCY FOLLOWED THE CREATURES. SHE COULD SEE THEIR DWINDLING FORMS, HEAR THEIR VANISHING SONGS AS THEY BORE OFF THEIR--AND HER--SON.

SHE RAN AFTER THEM, HER GAIT AS SPRINGY AS A YOUNG GIRL'S IN PURSUIT OF HER LOVER.



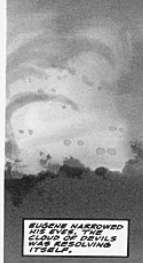
BUT HIS
PATH WAS
BLOCKED.

IN THE DISTANCE,
OBSCURING
WELCOME, A
CLOUD OF DUST,
AND AT ITS
SWIRLING HEART
A MULTITUDE
OF BURNING
EYES.

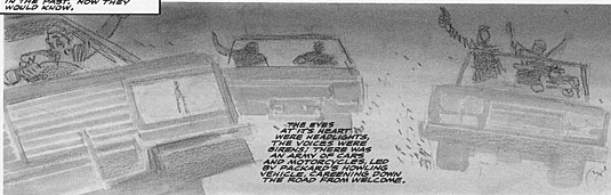
EUGENE KNEW HE HAD BEEN
CONSIDERED AGAINST, THOUGH
EVEN IN HIS MOST TORTURED
IMAGININGS HE COULD NOT
GRASP THE WHOLE TRUTH. HE
HEADED FOR WELCOME, FOLKS
THERE HAD SCORED AT HIM
IN THE PAST, NOW THEY
WOULD KNOW.



MY
CHRIST, THE
DEMONS'VE
TAKEN THE
TOWN!



EUGENE NARROWED
HIS EYES. THE
CLOUD OF DEVILS
WAS RESOLVING
ITSELF.



THIS EYES
AT ITS HEART
WERE HEADLIGHTS,
THE VOICES WERE
SIRENS! THERE WAS
AN ARMY OF CARS
AND MOTORCYCLES, LED
BY PACKARD'S HOWLING
VEHICLE, CARVENING DOWN
THE ROAD FROM WELCOME.



GOT
PROBLEMS,
EUGENE?

I'M NO
FOOL, PACKARD.
I SEEN THESE
THINGS.

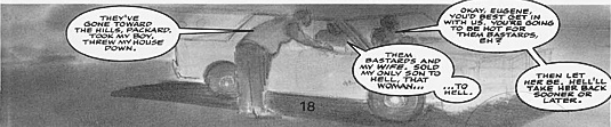
I KNOW YOU
HAVE, EUGENE. I
KNOW YOU HAVE. THERE'S
NO DENYING THAT THERE'S
DEVILS IN THEM HILLS.
SURE AS SHIT, WHAT DO
YOU THINK I'VE GOT
THIS POSSE TOGETHER
FOR IF IT AIN'T
DEVILS?



SEEMS
WE OWE YOU
AN APOLOGY,
GENE.

SEEMS
YOU DO.

SHE'S STILL A SOT, SHE THOUGHT,
HARRIVING THAT FAT-BOTTOMED
WHORE WAS THE DEATH OF HIM.
WHAT A WASTE OF A MAN.



THEY'VE
GONE TOWARD
THE HILLS, PACKARD.
TOOK MY BOY,
THREW MY HOUSE
DOWN.

THEM
BASTARDS AND
MY WIFE, SOLD
MY ONLY SON TO
HELL, THAT
WOMAN...

OKAY, EUGENE,
YOU'D BEST GET IN
WITH US. WE'RE GOING
TO BE HOT FOR
THEM BASTARDS,
EN?

...TO
HELL.

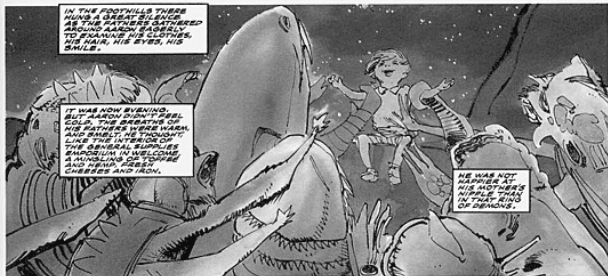
THEN LET
HER BE. HELL'LL
TAKE HER BACK
SOONER OR
LATER.



FROM THE MOMENT SHE'D SEEN THE CAR LIGHTS, SEEN THE GUNS AND THE HELICOPTERS, SHE KNEW SHE HAD LITTLE PLACE IN THE EVENTS AHEAD. THERE WAS NO WAY OF RESCUING AARON. SHE REALIZED THAT. HE BELONGED, IN SOME STRANGE WAY, TO THE CREATURES THAT HAD HUSSED THEE IN HER BODY TO MAKE HIM.

MAYBE SHE'D BEEN A VESSEL FOR SOME EXPERIMENT IN FERTILITY, AND NOW THE DOCTORS HAD RETURNED TO EXAMINE THE RESULTING CHILD. MAYBE THEY HAD SIMPLY TAKEN HIM OUT OF LOVE. WHATEVER THE REASONS, SHE ONLY HOPED SHE WOULD SEE THE OUTCOME OF THE BATTLE.

DEED IN HER, IN A PLACE TOUCHED ONLY BY MONSTERS, SHE HOPED FOR THEIR VICTORY. EVEN THOUGH MANY OF THE SPECIES SHE CALLED HER OWN WOULD PERISH AS A RESULT.



IN THE FOOTHILLS THERE HUNG A GREAT SILENCE AS THE FATHERS GATHERED AROUND AARON RAGERLY TO EXAMINE HIS CLOTHING, HIS HAIR, HIS EYES, HIS SMILE.

IT WAS NOW EVENING, BUT AARON DIDN'T FEEL COLD. THE BREATHS OF HIS FATHERS WERE WARM, AND SWEET. HE THOUGHT LIKE THE INTERIOR OF THE GENERAL SUPPLIES EMPORIUM IN WELCOME A HUNDRED OF TIMES AND HEW, GREEN, CHERRY AND JACQ.

HE WAS NOT AWARE AT HIS MOTHER'S NIPPLE THAT IN THAT RING OF DEVILS.



MEN-- WE'VE ARRIVED. WE'RE ORGANIZED, AND WE'VE GOT GOD ON OUR SIDE!

IT OCCURRED TO BOTH KOOKER AND DAVIDSON THAT AS SNEAK ATTACKS WENT, THIS WOULD NOT BE AMONGST THE QUIETEST.

THESE DEVILS TOOK EUSEB'S BOY AARON NOT FOUR HOURS PAST. TOOK HIM FAIRLY OFF HIS MOTHER'S TIT WHILE SHE WAS ROCKING HIM TO SLEEP. THEY AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT SAVAGES. SO WHEN YOU GET UP CLOSE TO ONE YOU JUST THINK HOW YOU'D HAVE FELT IF YOU'D BEEN TAKEN FROM YOUR MOTHER'S TIT--

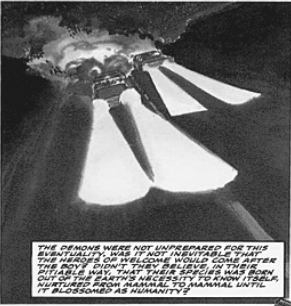
PACKARD LIKED THE PHRASE "MOTHER'S TIT." IT SAID SO MUCH SO SIMPLY, NOWHAT'S TIT HAD A GOOD DEAL MORE POWER TO MOVE THESE MEN THAN HER APPLE PIE.

HAD HE KNOWN WHO NAPOLEON BONAPARTE WAS, NO DOUBT HE WOULD HAVE FELT LIKE THAT CONQUEROR. HAD HE KNOWN THAT CONQUEROR'S LIFE STORY, HE MIGHT HAVE SEIZED THAT THIS WAS HIS WATERLOO! BUT JOSH PACKARD LIVED AND DIED BENEFIT OF NEKOS.



AARON FELT THE AIR CHANGE. IT WASN'T THAT HE WAS COLD! THE SENSATION THAT WARNING HIM REMAINED AS EMBRACING AS EVER. NO, SOMETHING WAS WRONG, SOMETHING, SOMEONE, WAS COMING TO INTERFERE WITH THIS NIGHT OF FESTIVAL, UNPLANNED AND UNINVITED.

AARON SCENTED PACKARD AND HIS EYEPATHER, AND SMELLING THEM, KNEW THEM TO BE ALIEN. AFTER TONIGHT THEY WOULD BE KNOWN DISPASSIONATELY, LIKE ANIMALS OF A DIFFERENT SPECIES. IT WAS THE GORRUSUS ARRAY OF DEMONS AROUND HIM HE FELT CLOSEST TO, AND HE KNEW HE WOULD PROTECT THEM, IF NECESSARY, WITH HIS LIFE.

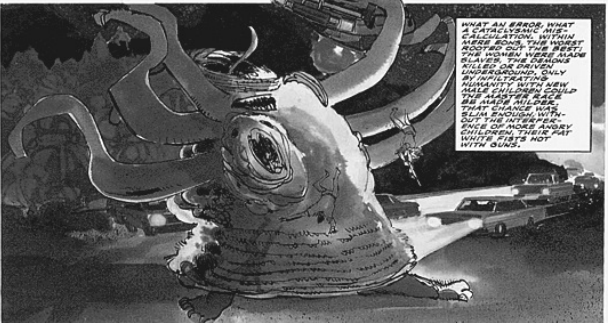


THE DEMONS WERE NOT UNPREPARED FOR THIS EVENTUALITY. WAS IT NOT INEVITABLE THAT THE HERDS OF WELCOME WOULD COME AFTER THE BOYS DIDN'T THEY BELIEVE IN THEIR PITTABLE WAY, THAT THEIR SPECIES WAS BORN OUT OF THE EARTH'S NECESSITY TO KNOW ITSELF, NURTURED FROM MAMMAL TO MAMMAL UNTIL IT BLOSSOMED AS HUMANITY?



WOMEN HAD ALWAYS EXISTED! THEY HAD LIVED, A SPECIES TO THEMSELVES, WITH THE DEMONS. BUT THEY HAD WANTED PLAYMATES, AND TOGETHER THEY HAD MADE MEN, THE MARRIAGE OF SEMEN IN LUCY'S BODY WAS THE SAME MIX THAT MADE THE FIRST MALES.

BLAM!



WHAT AN ERROR, WHAT A CATASTROPHIC MIS-CALCULATION. WITHIN WERE BONS, THE WORST ROOTED OUT THE BEST! THE WOMEN WERE MADE SLAVES, THE DEMONS KILLED OR DRIVEN UNDERGROUND, ONLY BY INFILTRATING HUMANITY WITH NEW MALE CHILDREN COULD THE MASTER RACE BE MADE MILD. THAT CHANCE WAS SLAIN ENOUGH WITH- OUT THE INTERFERENCE OF MORE ANGRY CHILDREN, THEIR FAT WHITE FISTS NOT WITH GUNS.

THE DEMON SHOOK THE CAR AS A CHILD KICKED A TOY UNTIL THE DRIVER'S DOOR OPENED AND TREDMILL ROLL TO THE GROUND AT THE CREATURE'S SHIRT OF SKIN.

BLAM!
BLAM!

MA!
HELL
MEEEE!

ATTACK!

DAVIDSON OFFERED UP A SILENT PRAYER TO YAHWEH, BUDAHA, AND GARDEN OF EDEN. GRANT HE COULDN'T GRANT THE INDIFFERENCE, GRANT ME A SENSE OF HUMOR.

SKRAK!

ACROSS A CLUTTER OF CRASHED VEHICLES AND BLOOD-SPLATTERED HOODS HE SAW THE DEMONS SLOPPING AWAY FROM THE BATTLE LEAVING THIS ONE EXTRAORDINARY MONSTER TO HOLD THE BRIDGEHEAD.

THERE'D BE NO DITCHED BATTLE NO HAND-TO-VENTAGE FIGHT. THE BOY WOULD SIMPLY BE EATEN ALIVE. ON WHAT? THEY PLANNED FOR THE FINE LITTLE BASTARD. INDEED, WASN'T THAT THE PLAN? WHEN THE RETREATING DEMONS WERE HOLDING SO HIGH, LIKE A TROPHY?

THE REMAINING MONSTER HAD TIRED OF ITS OWN PRIZE, BUT ONLY AFTER IT HAD SHAKEN PACKARD'S CAR UNTIL THE SHREK RATTLED LIKE A DEAD FROG IN A TIN CAN.

THE SMELL OF GASOLINE FILLED THE AIR, TURNING DAVIDSON'S STOMACH.

HEADS
DOWN!

A GRENADE? SURELY NOT!
NOT WITH SO MUCH GAS
ON THE —

THERE WAS A SHELL IN THE AIR LIKE BURNING CANDY! THE CREATURE WAS CLEARLY IN AN AGONY OF CREMATION, A FLAKE OF FIRE DROPPED FROM THE TOWERING DEMON AND TOUCHED THE LAKE OF GASOLINE IN WHICH PACKARD HAD LANCED.

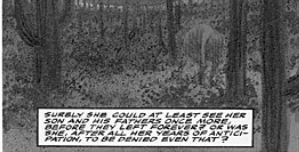
KABLAM!

DEMON OR MAN? —
NEITHER STOOD A CHANCE OF SURVIVAL. THE FLAMES WASHED THEM AWAY.

AFTER HOURS OF WALKING IN THE DESERT, LUCY TOO ARRIVED AT THE SCENE. SHE COULD HEAR AND SEE THE REMAINS OF THE BATTLE, BUT SHE DID NOT GO THAT WAY. ON THE HORIZON, SHE SAW WHAT SHE WAS AFTER: A LINE OF CREATURES, HURRYING AWAY FROM THE HILLS, AND, ONCE AGAIN, SHE BEGAN TO RUN.



BUT, IN AN EMPTY STRETCH OF DESERT, THE CONVOYATION OF BEASTS SIMPLY DISAPPEARED FROM SIGHT, FROM WHERE LUCY WAS STANDING, PLANTING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. THEY SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN SWALLOWED UP BY THE EARTH.



SURELY SHE COULD AT LEAST SEE HER SON AND HIS FATHERS ONCE MORE, BEFORE THEY LEFT FOREVER? SHE WAS SHE. AFTER ALL, HER YEARS OF ANTICIPATION, TO BE DENIED EVEN THAT?

IN THE LEAD CAR, DAVIDSON WAS DRIVING, COMMANDERED TO DO SO BY EUGENE, WHO WAS NOT AT PRESENT A MAN TO BE ARGUED WITH, HIS ORDERS TO THE STRECHLING ARMY THAT FOLLOWED HIM WERE TWO PARTS INCOHERENT OBSCENITIES TO ONE PART SENSE.



SEE, THEM BLACK-EYED
SONS OF BITCHES
DON'T HAVE NO
FUCKING
HEADS!

I--I
DON'T KNOW
WHICH WAY
THEY'VE
GONE!

SHOW ME
WHERE THE
REST OF 'EM ARE
OR I'LL BLOW
YOUR BRAINS
OUT!

WHAT
YOU MEAN?
SHOW
ME!

I CAN'T
SHOW YOU
IF THEY'VE
DISAPPEARED.



STOP
THE CARS!
STOP!



A SUDDEN SILENCE. THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE SEEN OR HEARD IN ANY DIRECTION. THEY'D DISAPPEARED. THE WHOLE CAECOPHONOUS TRIBE OF DEADENS HAD SIMPLY VANISHED INTO THE AIR, CHIMERICAL.

LUCY WALKED TOWARD THE LINE OF CARS. IT WAS ALL OVER BY NOW. THEY HAD ALL BEEN TRICKED! THE DISAPPEARING ACT WAS A TRUMP CARD NO ONE COULD HAVE ANTICIPATED.



THEN SHE
HEARD AARON.

SHE COULDN'T SEE HIM, BUT HIS VOICE WAS AS CLEAR AS A BELL; AND LIKE A BELL, IT SUMMONED, LIKE A BELL, IT BANGS OUT: CELEBRATE WITH US.

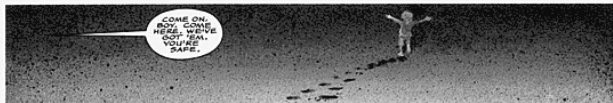
EUGENE HEARD IT
TOO. THEY WERE
NEAR AFTER ALL.

WHERE
IS HE?
HMM?





LUCY AND THE CONVOY
HEADED TOWARD HIM.



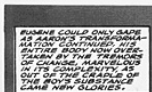


THE FACADE OF BOYHOOD BROKE AS THE FATHER INSIDE THE SON SHOWED ITS VAST AND UNIMAGINABLE FACE.

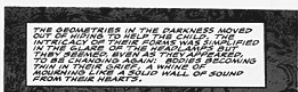


EVEN AS AARON BECAME HIS FATHER'S SON, THE SLOPE BEGAN TO SOFTEN.

DAVIDSON FELT IT FIRST: A SLIGHT SHIFT IN THE TEXTURE OF THE SAND AS THOUGH AN ORDER HAD PASSED THROUGH IT, SUBTLE BUT ALL-PERVASIVE.



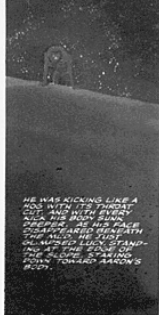
EUGENE COULD ONLY GAZE AS AARON'S TRANSFORMATION CONTINUED. HIS ENTIRE BODY NOW OVERTAKEN BY THE TREMBLES OF CHANGE, MARVELOUS IN ITS COMPLEXITY, AS OUT OF THE CAULD OF THE BOY'S SUBSTANCE CAME NEW GLORIES.



THE GEOMETRIES IN THE DARKNESS MOVED OUT OF HIDING TO HELP THE CHILD. THE INTRICACY OF THEIR FORMS WAS SUMMARIZED IN THE GLARE OF THE HEADLAMPS BUT, THEY REMAINED. EVEN AS THEY APPEARED, TO BE CHANGING AGAIN: BODIES BECOMING THIN IN THEIR SHUFF, A WHINE OF MOURNING LIKE A SOLID WALL OF SOUND FROM THEIR HEARTS.



AARROOOO





GET
HELP!
GET
HELP!



THE HEAD WAS SILENT;
BY HIS GLAZED LOOK
IT WAS APPARENT THAT
HE'D LOST HIS MIND.

THE MOUTH COULD
ONLY SCREAM.

JESUS!



AND DAVIDSON? HE SCARCELY
THOUGHT OF HIMSELF. OF THE
FATE OF BARBARA, OF THE
CHILDREN, HE THOUGHT NOT
AT ALL.

PLEASE
HELP US!!!
FETCH
HELP.



YES...

IT WOULD BE NOON
BEFORE SHE COULD
FETCH HELP TO THE
WOMAN, TO THE TOWER,
TO THE HEAD, TO THE
MOUTH. BY THAT
TIME THE WILDERNESS
WOULD HAVE HAD THE
REST OF THEM. THE
SUN WOULD HAVE
BOILED THEIR BRAIN-
PANS DRY, SAWATS
WOULD HAVE NESTED
IN THEIR HAIR, THE
BUZZARDS WOULD
HAVE HOOKED OUT
THEIR HELPLESS EYES.

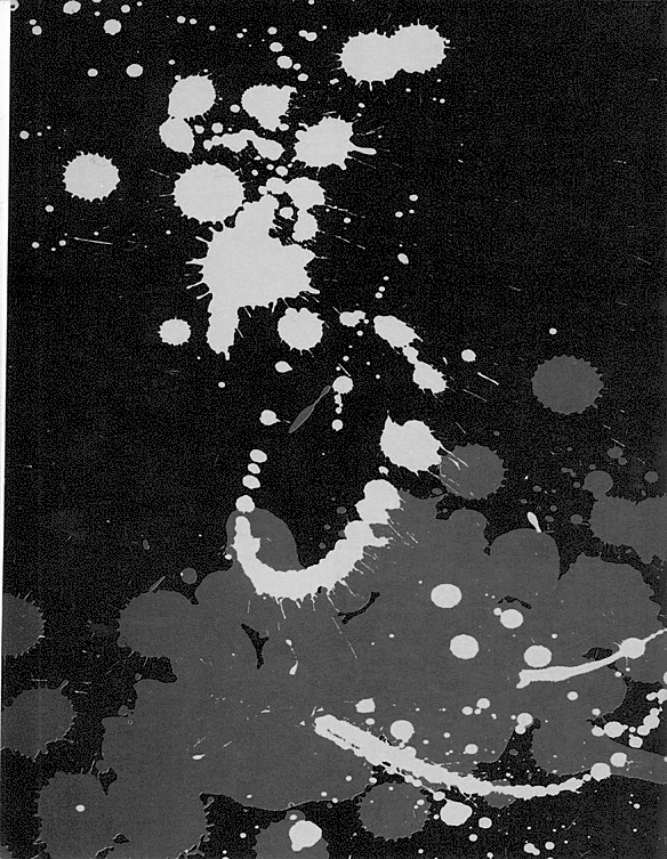
SHE GLANCED ROUND ONCE MORE
AT THEIR TRIVIAL FORMS, DWARFED
BY THE BLOODY SUEDE OF THE
DAWN SKY. LITTLE POTS AND
COMMAS OF HUMAN PAIN ON A
BLANK SHEET OF SAND.

LUCY DIDN'T CARE
TO THINK OF THE
PEN THAT WROTE
THEM THERE, THAT
WAS FOR TOMORROW.



AFTER A WHILE,
SHE BEGAN TO
RUN.





IN THE HILLS

THE CITIES

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE FIRST WEEK OF THE YUGOSLAVIAN TRIP THAT MICK DISCOVERED WHAT A POLITICAL BIGOT HE'D CHOSEN AS A LOVER.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN BOLTON

CERTAINLY HE'D BEEN WARNED: ONE OF THE QUEENS AT THE BATHS HAD TOLD HIM JUDD WAS TO THE RIGHT OF ATILLA THE HUN, BUT THE MAN HAD BEEN ONE OF JUDD'S EX-AFFAIRS, AND MICK HAD PRESUMED THERE WAS MORE SPITE THAN PERCEPTION IN THE CHARACTER ASSASSINATION.



IF ONLY HE'D LISTENED THEN HE WOULDN'T BE RIDING ALONG AN INTERMINABLE ROAD IN A VOLKSWAGEN THAT SUDDENLY SEEMED THE SIZE OF A COFFIN, LISTENING TO JUDD'S VIEWS ON SOVIET EXPANSIONISM. JESUS, HE WAS SO BORING.



IT WASN'T THAT HE DISAGREED WITH EVERYTHING JUDD SAID: SOME OF THE ARGUMENTS (THE ONES MICK UNDERSTOOD) SEEMED QUITE SENSIBLE. BUT THEN, WHAT DID HE KNOW? HE WAS A DANCE TEACHER. JUDD WAS A JOURNALIST, A PROFESSIONAL PUNDIT.

HE FELT LIKE MOST JOURNALISTS MICK HAD ENCOUNTERED: THAT HE WAS OBLIGED TO HAVE AN OPINION ON EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN, ESPECIALLY POLITICS; THAT WAS THE BEST TROUGH TO WALLON IN. YOU COULD GET YOUR SHOULDERS, EYES, HEAD AND FRONT HOODES IN THAT MESS OF MUCK AND HAVE A FINE OLD TIME SPLASHING AROUND.



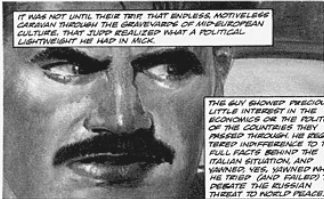
EVERYTHING, ACCORDING TO JUDD, WAS POLITICAL. THE ARTS WERE POLITICAL. SEX WAS POLITICAL. RELIGION, COMMERCE, GARDENING, EATING, DRINKING AND RUSTING—ALL POLITICAL.

JESUS, IT WAS MIND-BLOWINGLY BORING. KILLINGLY, LOVE-DEADENINGLY BORING.

NORSE STILL, JUDD DIDN'T SEEM TO NOTICE HOW BORED MICK HAD BECOME, OR IF HE NOTICED, HE DIDN'T CARE.

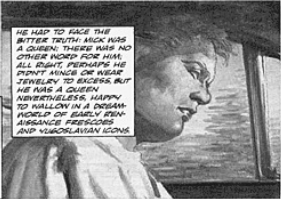


JUDD, MICK HAD DECIDED, WAS A SELFISH PARTIOT, AND AS SOON AS THEIR HONEYMOON WAS OVER HE'D PART WITH THE GUY.

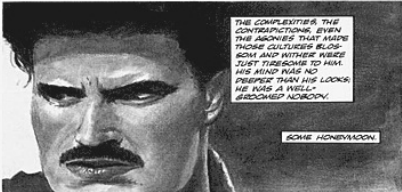


IT WAS NOT UNTIL THEIR TENT THAT ENDLESS, MOTIVELESS
CARAVAN THROUGH THE GRAVEYARDS OF MID-EUROPEAN
CULTURE, THAT JUPP REALIZED WHAT A POLITICAL
LIGHTNINGBOLT HE HAD IN MICK.

THE GUY SHOWED PRECIOUS
LITTLE INTEREST IN THE
ECONOMICS OR THE POLITICS
OF THE COUNTRIES THEY
PASSED THROUGH. HE RES-
TAINED INDIFFERENCE TO THE
FULL FACTS BEHIND THE
ITALIAN SITUATION, AND
YAWNED. YES, YAWNED WHEN
HE TRIED (AND FAILED) TO
DEBATE THE RUSSIAN
THREAT TO HUNGARIAN PEACE.



HE HAD TO FACE THE
BITTER TRUTH: MICK WAS
A QUEEN; THERE WAS NO
OTHER WORD FOR HIM.
ALL RIGHT, PERHAPS HE
DIDN'T MARCH OR WEAR
JEWELRY TO EXCESS, BUT
HE WAS A QUEEN
NEVERTHELESS, HAPPY
TO WALLON IN A DREAM-
WORLD OF EARLY REN-
AISSANCE FRESCOS
AND YUGOSLAVIAN ICONS.

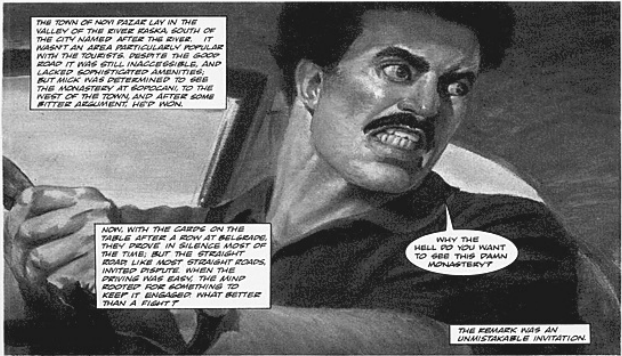


THE COMPLEXITIES, THE
CONTRADICTIONS, EVEN
THE JARONES THAT MADE
THOSE CULTURES BLOS-
SOM AND WITHER WERE
JUST TIRISOME TO HIM.
HIS MIND WAS NO
DEEPER THAN HIS LOOKS.
HE WAS A WELL-
GROOMED NOBODY.

SOME HONEYMOON.



THE TOWN OF NOVI PAZAR LAY IN THE
VALLEY OF THE RIVER RASKA, SOUTH OF
THE CITY NAMED AFTER THE RIVER. IT
WASNT AN AREA PARTICULARLY POPULAR
WITH THE TOURISTS. DESPITE THE GOOD
ROAD IT WAS STILL INACCESSIBLE, AND
LACKED SOPHISTICATED AMENITIES;
BUT MICK WAS DETERMINED TO SEE
THE MONASTERY AT KOVOCANI, TO THE
WEST OF THE TOWN, AND AFTER SOME
BITTER ARGUMENT, HE'D WON.



NOW, WITH THE GARDS ON THE
TABLE AFTER A ROW AT BELGRADE,
THEY DRIVE IN SILENCE MOST OF
THE TIME, BUT THE STRAIGHT
ROADS LIKE MOST STRAIGHT ROADS,
INVITED DISPUTE. WHEN THE
DRIVING WAS EASY, THE AUNT
ROOATED FOR SOMETHING TO
KEEP IT ENGAGED. WHAT BETTER
THAN A FIGHT?

WHY THE
HELL DO YOU WANT
TO SEE THIS DAMN
MONASTERY?

THE REMARK WAS AN
UNMISTAKABLE INVITATION.





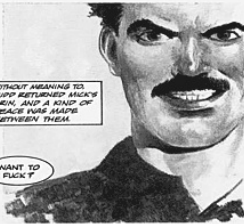
MICK LOOKED AROUND. JUDD WAS STANDING ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE CAR, HIS BEING A KNITTED LINE OF BUDDENING ANGER. BUT HANDSOME. ON YES, A FACE THAT MADE WOMEN WEEP WITH FRUSTRATION THAT HE WAS GAY. A HEAVY BLACK MOUSTACHE (PERFECTLY TRIMMED) AND EYES YOU COULD WATCH FOREVER, AND NEVER SEE THE SAME LIGHT IN THEM TWICE. WHY IN GOD'S NAME, THOUGHT MICK, DOES A MAN AS FINE AS THAT HAVE TO BE SUCH AN INSENSITIVE LITTLE SHIT?

JUDD RETURNED THE LOOK OF CONTEMPTUOUS APPRAISAL, STARRING AT THE POUTING PRETTY BOY ACROSS THE ROAD. IT MADE HIM WANT TO FLICK, SEEING THE LITTLE ACT. MICK WAS PERFORMING FOR HIS BENEFIT. IT MIGHT JUST HAVE BEEN PLEASIBLE IN A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN. IN A TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD, IT LACKED CREDIBILITY.



WITHOUT MEANING TO, JUDD RETURNED MICK'S GLEN, AND A KIND OF PEACE WAS MADE BETWEEN THEM.

WANT TO FLICK?



IT'S NO USE. WE'RE NOT COMPATIBLE.

WANTA BETT?

MICK WAS ALREADY UNDEEPED AND TURNING AWAY TOWARDS THE WHEAT FIELD THAT BORDERED THE ROAD.

JUDD WATCHED AS MICK CUT A SWATH THROUGH THE SWAYING SEA. HIS BACK THE COLOR OF THE GRASS, SO THAT HE WAS ALMOST CAMOUFLAGED BY IT. IT WAS A DANGEROUS GAME, HIDEYING IN THE OPEN AIR--THIS WASN'T SAN FRANCISCO OR EVEN HAMPTHEAD HEATH.



NERVOUSLY, JUDD GLANCED ALONG THE ROAD, STILL EMPTY IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

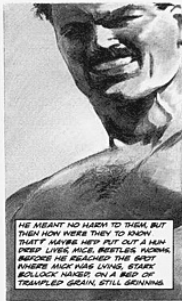


AND MICK WAS TURNING, DEEP IN THE FIELD, TURNING AND SMILING AND MOVING LIKE A SWIMMER BUOYED UP IN A GOLDEN SURF.

WHAT THE HELL, THERE WAS NOBODY TO SEE, NOBODY TO KNOW, JUST THE HILLS, LIQUID IN THE HEATHAZE, THEIR FORESTED BACKS BENT TO THE BUSINESS OF THE EARTH, AND A LOST DOG SITTING AT THE EDGE OF THE ROAD, WAITING FOR SOME LOST MASTER.



FIELD MICE RAN AHEAD OF HIM, SCURRYING THROUGH THE STALKS AS THE GRANT GAVE THEM PAIN. HIS FEET LIKE THUNDER, JUDY SAW THEIR PANIC, AND SMILED.



HE MEANT NO HARM TO THEM, BUT THEN HOW WERE THEY TO KNOW THAT? MAYBE HE'D PUT OUT A HUN-DEEP LIVER, MICE, RESTLESS HUN-GRING. BEFORE HE REACHED THE SPOT WHERE MICK WAS LYING, STARK BOLLOCK NAKED, ON A BED OF TRAMPLED GRAIN, STILL GRINNING.



IT WAS GOOD LOVE THEY MADE, GOOD STRONG LOVE, EQUAL IN PLEASURE FOR BOTH; THERE WAS A PRECISION TO THEIR PASSION, SENSING THE MOMENT WHEN EFFORTLESS DELIGHT BECAME URGENT WHEN DESIRE BECAME NECESSARY.



THEY LOCKED TOGETHER, LIME AROUND LIME, TONGUE AROUND TONGUE, IN A KNOT ONLY ORGASM COULD UNTIE. THEIR BACKS ALTERNATELY SCORCHED AND SCRATCHED AS THEY ROLLED AROUND BUGHANING BLOWS AND KISSES.

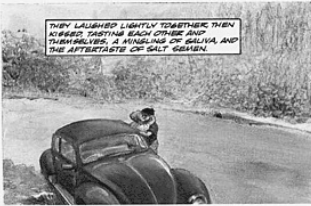


WHEN THEY FINALLY MADE THEIR WAY BACK TO THE HOUSE, THERE WAS BODY-THRESHED WHEAT IN THEIR HAIR AND THEIR EARS, IN THEIR SOLES AND BETWEEN THEIR TOES. THEIR SMILING HAD BEEN REPLACED WITH EASY SMILES: THE TRACE, IF NOT PERMANENT, WOULD LAST A FEW HOURS AT LEAST.

WE'LL FORGET THE MONASTERY, OK?

I THOUGHT--

I COULDN'T BEAR ANOTHER FUCKING VIRGIN--



THEY LAUGHED LIGHTLY TOGETHER, THEN KISSED, TASTING EACH OTHER AND THEMSELVES, A MINGLING OF SALIVA, AND THE AFTERTASTE OF SALT SEVEN.



THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS BRIGHT, BUT NOT PASTIC-
ULARLY PUGH. NO BLUE SKIES; JUST AN EVEN LAYER
OF WHITE CLOUD. THE MORNING AIR WAS SHARP IN
THE LINING OF THE NOSTRILS, LIKE ETHER,
OR PEPPERMINT.

VASLAV JELOVSEK WATCHED THE
PIGEONS IN THE MAIN SQUARE
OF POPOLAC COURTING DEATH
AS THEY SHOFFED AND FLUT-
TERED AHEAD OF THE VEHICLES
THAT WERE BUZZING AROUND.

AN AIR OF SOBER INTENTION
BARELY SUPPRESSED THE
EXCITEMENT HE FELT ON THIS
DAY. AN EXCITEMENT HE KNEW
WAS SHARED BY EVERY MAN,
WOMAN AND CHILD
IN POPOLAC.

SHARED BY THE PIGEONS,
TOO, FOR ALL HE KNEW.



THE CLOUD-LAYER WAS LOW;
NOT IDEAL FOR THE CELE-
BRATIONS. A PHRASE PEESED
THROUGH HIS MIND: AN EN-
GLISH PHRASE HE'D HEARD
FROM A FRIEND: "TO HAVE
YOUR HEAD IN THE CLOUDS."
IT MEANT, HE GATHERED,
TO BE LOST IN A REVERIE,
IN A WHITE, SIGHTLESS
DREAM.

THAT, HE THOUGHT NOWLY,
WAS ALL THE WEST KNEW
ABOUT CLOUDS. THAT THEY
STOOD FOR DREAMS. IT
TOOK A VISION THIN
LACKED TO MAKE A TRUTH
OUT OF THAT CASUAL
TURN OF PHRASE.



HERE, IN THESE SOBER
HILLS, WOULDN'T THEY
CREATE A SPECTACULAR
REALITY FROM THOSE
IDLE WORDS? A
LIVING PROVERB.

A HEAD IN THE CLOUDS.



NOW THE FIRST LEG OF POPOLAC
WAS BRECTED. HE WATCHED IN ADMIR-
ATION AS THE WORK OF POSITIONING
AND BUCKLING AND BOYING WAS COM-
PLETED. ALL THE GARTY CHECKS
HAD BEEN METICULOUSLY MADE, AND
THE LEG LEFT THE SQUARE, ITS
SHADOW FALLING NOBLY ACROSS
THE FACE OF THE TOWN HALL.



VASLAV SIPPED HIS SWEET COFFEE AND
ALLOWED HIMSELF A LITTLE GRUNT OF SATISFAC-
TION. SUCH DAYS, SUCH DAYS, DAYS FILLED WITH
GLOW, WITH SNAPPING FLASS AND HIGH,
STOMACH-TURNING SIGHTS, ENOUGH TO LAST A
MAN A LIFETIME. IT WAS A GOLDEN FORETASTE
OF HEAVEN.

LET AMERICA HAVE ITS
SIMPLE PLEASURES, ITS
CARTOON MUSK, ITS
CAMPY-COATED CASTLES,
ITS CULTE AND TECHNO-
OBIES; HE WANTED
NONE OF IT. THE
GREATEST WONDER OF
THE WORLD WAS HERE,
HIDDEN IN THE HILLS.

AH, SUCH DAYS, THESE
LONG AND ARDULOUS DAYS
OF MIRACLES, BOTH
HERE AND IN--



PODUTEVO IN THE MAIN SQUARE OF POPODAC'S
RITUAL EVENING, THE SCENE WAS NO LESS ANIMATED
AND NO LESS INSPIRING. PERHAPS THERE WAS
A MUTED SENSE OF SADNESS UNDERLYING
THIS YEAR'S CELEBRATION, BUT THAT WAS
UNDERSTANDABLE. NITA OREKHOVICH, POD-
UTEVO'S LOVED AND RESPECTED ORGANIZER,
WAS NO LONGER LIVING.

THE PREVIOUS WINTER
HAD CLAIMED HER AT
THE AGE OF NINETEEN-
FOUR, LEAVING THE
CITY BESET BY HER
FIERCE OPINIONS
AND HER FIERCE
PROPORTIONS.



FOR SIXTY YEARS NITA HAD
WORKED WITH THE CITIZENS
OF PODUTEVO, ALWAYS
PLANNING FOR THE NEXT
CONTEST AND IMPROVING ON
THE DESIGNS. HER ENERGIES
SPENT ON MAKING THE NEXT
CREATION MORE AMBITIOUS
AND MORE LIFE-LIKE THAN
THE LAST.



NITA'S DAUGHTER HAD TAKEN
OVER IN HER MOTHER'S
STEAD, BUT SHE LACKED
NITA'S POWER TO GALVA-
NIZE THE PEOPLE INTO
ACTION. MAYBE, AFTER
TWO OF THREE DECADES,
AND WITH A FEW MORE
CONTESTS UNDER HER
BELT, NITA OREKHOVICH'S
DAUGHTER WOULD MAKE
THE GRAPE.



BUT FOR TODAY, PODUTEVO
WAS BEHIND. SAFETY CHECKS
WERE BEING OVERLOOKED.
NERVOUS LOOKS REPLACED
THE CONFIDENCE OF
EARLIER YEARS.



NEVERTHELESS, AT SIX MINUTES BEFORE
EIGHT THE FIRST LINE OF PODUTEVO
MADE ITS WAY OUT OF THE CITY TO
THE ASSEMBLY POINT, TO WAIT FOR
ITS FELLOW.

BY THAT TIME THE FLANKS
WERE ALREADY LAPPED
TOGETHER IN POPODAC,
AND ARMED CONTINGENTS
WERE ANNATING ORPERS
IN THE TOWN SQUARE.



MICK WOKED PROMPTLY AT SEVEN. A PULL MORNING LIGHT WHIMPERED THROUGH THE THIN HOTEL CURTAINS, NOT ENCOURAGING AN EARLY DEPARTURE.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES' STARRING AT THE DREADED PAINTWORK ON THE CEILING, HE GOT UP AND WENT TO THE WINDOW.

THE SKY WAS OVERCAST, AND THE ROOFS OF MONT PIAZZA WERE GREY AND FEATURELESS IN THE FLAT MORNING LIGHT. BUT BEYOND THE ROOFS, TO THE EAST, HE COULD SEE THE HILLS. THERE WAS SUN THERE, QUARTS OF LIGHT CAUGHT THE BLUE-GREEN OF THE FOREST, INVITING A VISIT TO THEIR GLOVES.



THE HILLS, YES; TODAY HE DECIDED THEY WOULD SEE THE HILLS.

IT WAS EIGHT-FIFTEEN



BY NINE THE MAIN BODIES OF POPOLAZ AND PODOLAZ WERE SUBSTANTIALLY ASSEMBLED IN THEIR ALLOTTED DISTRICTS. THE LIMBS OF BOTH CITIES WERE READY AND WAITING TO JOIN THEIR EXPECTANT TORSOS.

WESLEY JELDOVEN CAPPED HIS GLOVED HANDS OVER HIS EYES AND SURVEYED THE SKY. THE CLOUD-MASS HAD RISEN IN THE LAST HOUR, NO POINT OF IT, AND THERE WERE BREAKS IN THE CLOUDS TO THE WEST; EVEN, ON OCCASION, A FEW GLIMPSES OF THE SUN. IT WOULDN'T BE A PERFECT DAY FOR THE CONTEST PERHAPS, BUT CERTAINLY ADEQUATE.



ABOUT NINE-THIRTY MICK AND JUDY
MOTORED OUT OF NEW PAZAR AND
TOOK THE BEACON ROAD SOUTH TO
THE HILL VALLEY.

THE ROAD WAS EMPTY, THE FOREST
STILL THE OCCASIONAL FARMHOUSE
THEY DROVE BY APPEARED LOCKED
AND SHUTTERED UP.

AT FIRST THIS SOLITARY JOURNEY
THROUGH THE HILLS WAS REFRESHING
IN ITS LACK OF HUMAN CONTACT, BUT
AS THE MORNING DREW ON, AN
UNEASINESS GREW ON THEM.

SHOULDN'T
WE HAVE SEEN
A SIGNPOST TO
MITROVICA?

MAYBE...

THE ROAD WAS
DETERIORATING
RAPIDLY.

THUD

TAKE THE
NEXT TURNING.
ANYTHING'S BETTER
THAN THIS.

THERE!

NOT A MAJOR ROAD, CERTAINLY,
BUT IT WAS AN ESCAPE FROM THE
ENDLESS PERSPECTIVE OF THE
ROAD THEY WERE TRAPPED ON.

THEY WERE BEGINNING TO CLIMB NOW, AS THE TRACK
WOUND ITS WAY UP INTO THE HILLS, THE FOREST CLOSED
OVER THEM, BLOTTING OUT THE SKY, SO A SHIFTING
PATCHWORK OF LIGHT AND SHADOW GLOTTED OVER THE
ROADWAY AS THEY PROVE. THERE WAS BURNING SUSPENSE,
VIGILANCE AND OPTIMISM, AND A SWEET, OR
NEW PINE AND UNLUNG EARTH.

THIS IS
BECOMING A BLOODY
SAFARI!

I
FORGOT TO PACK
IT.

WHERE'S
YOUR SENSE OF
ADVENTURE?

A FOX CROSSED THE TRACK, UP AHEAD AND
WATCHED A LONG MOMENT AS THE CAR
GUMBBLED UP TOWARDS IT. THEN WITH THE
LEISURELY STRIDE OF A FEARLESS PRINCE, IT
SAUNTERED AWAY INTO THE TREES.

WHEREVER THEY WERE GOING,
MICK THOUGHT, THIS WAS BETTER
THAN THE ROAD THEY'D LEFT.



NUCK AND JUDD WERE STILL AN HOUR'S DRIVE FROM POPULAC WHEN THE HEAD OF THE CONTINGENT AT LAST MARCHED OUT OF THE TOWN SQUARE AND TOOK UP ITS POSITION WITH THE MAIN BODY.

THIS LAST EXIT LEFT THE CITY COMPLETELY DESERTED. NOT EVEN THE SICK ON THE CLIP WERE NEGLECTED ON THIS DAY; NO ONE WAS TO BE DENIED THE SPECTACLE AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE CONTEST.

THE CONFRONTATION HAD TO BE TOTAL, CITY AGAINST CITY. THIS WAS THE WAY IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN.

BY NOON THEY WERE GATHERED. THE CITIZENS OF POPULAC AND POPUJEVO, IN THE SECRET WELL OF THE HILLS, HIDDEN FROM CUNILING EYES, TO DO ANCIENT AND CEREMONIAL BATTLE.



TENS OF THOUSANDS OF HEARTS BEAT FASTER. TENS OF THOUSANDS OF BODIES STRETCHED AND STAINED AND SWEATED AS THE TWIN CITIES TOOK THEIR POSITIONS.



IN THE TOWERING BODY OF POPUJEVO, A FEW TECHNICAL HITCHES WERE BECOMING APPARENT. A SLIGHT FLAW IN THE KNITTING OF THE LEFT FLANK HAD RESULTED IN A WEAKNESS THERE, AND THERE WERE CONSEQUENT PROBLEMS IN THE SWIVELLING MECHANISM OF THE HIPS.

THE SHADOWS OF THE BODIES DARKENED TRACTS OF LAND THE SIZE OF SMALL TOWNS; THE WEIGHT OF THEIR FEET TRAMPLED THE GRASS TO A GREEN MILK; THEIR MOVEMENT KILLED ANIMALS, CRUSHED BUSHES, AND THREW DOWN TREES. THE EARTH LITERALLY REVERBERATED WITH THEIR PRESSURE, THE HILLS ECHOING WITH THE ROOMING DIN OF THEIR STEPS.

NOR WERE THE CITIZENS AS RESILIENT AS THEY HAD BEEN IN PREVIOUS CONTESTS. A BAD DECADE FOR CROPS HAD PRODUCED BODIES LESS WELL-NOURISHED, SPINES LESS SUPPLE, WILLIAMS LESS RESOLUTE. THE BADLY KNITTED FLANK MIGHT NOT HAVE CAUSED AN ACCIDENT IN ITSELF, BUT FURTHER WEAKENED BY THE FRAILTY OF THE COMPETITORS, IT SET A SCENE FOR DEATH ON AN UNPRECEDENTED SCALE.

THEY STOPPED THE CAR.

HEAR
THAT?

HEAR
WHAT?

TOO MANY ROCK SHOWS
HAD BLOWN MICK'S
EARDRUMS TO HELL.

THE BIRDS WERE QUIETER NOW. THE NOISE
CAME AGAIN. IT WASN'T SIMPLY A NOISE. IT
WAS ALMOST A MOTION IN THE EARTH. A
ROAR THAT SEEMED HEATED IN THE
SUBSTANCE OF THE HILLS.

THAT.

I HEAR IT
NOW. IT'S UP AHEAD.
SOMEWHERE. WHAT THE
HELL IS IT?

THUNDER. WAS IT? NO--TOO
RHYTHMICAL. IT CAME AGAIN
THROUGH THE SOLES OF
THE FEET--

WHATEVER
IT IS, I WANT TO
SEE IT.

SOUNDS
ALMOST LIKE GUNS.
BIG GUNS.

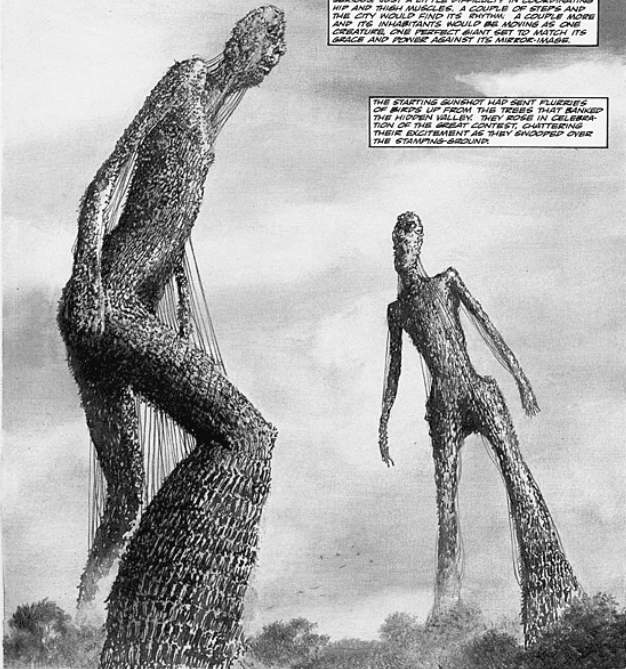
THROUGH HIS RUSSIAN-MADE
BINOCULARS VASLAV JELOVSEK
WATCHED THE STARTING OFFI-
CIAL KISS HIS PISTOL. HE SAW
THE FEATHER OF WHITE SMOKE
RISE FROM THE BARREL, AND A
SECOND LATER HEARD THE
BOUND OF THE SHOT ACROSS
THE VALLEY.

THE CONTEST HAD BEGUN.

HE LOOKED UP AT TWIN TOWERS OF POPOLAC AND POPULUVO. HEAPS IN THE CLOUDS--WELL ALMOST. THEY PRACTICALLY STRETCHED TO TOUCH THE SKY. IT WAS AN AWESOME SIGHT, A BREATH-STOPPING, SLEEP-STABBING SIGHT. TWO CITIES SURVIVING AND WITHSTANDING PREPARING TO TAKE THEIR FIRST STEPS TOWARDS EACH OTHER IN THIS RITUAL BATTLE.

OF THE TWO, POPULUVO SEEMED THE LESS STABLE. THERE WAS A SLIGHT HESITATION AS THE CITY RAISED ITS LEFT LEG TO BEGIN ITS MARCH. NOTHING SERIOUS, JUST A LITTLE DIFFICULTY IN COORDINATING HIP AND THIGH MUSCLES. A COUPLE OF STEPS AND THE CITY WOULD FIND ITS RHYTHM. A COUPLE MORE AND ITS INHABITANTS WOULD BE MOVING AS ONE CREATURE, ONE PERFECT GIANT GET TO MATCH ITS GRACE AND POWER AGAINST ITS MIRROR-IMAGE.

THE STARTING GUNSHOT HAD SENT FLURRIES OF BIRDS UP FROM THE TREES THAT BANKED THE HIDDEN VALLEY. THEY ROSE IN CELEBRATION OF THE GREAT CONTEST, CHATTERING THEIR EXCITEMENT AS THEY SHOODED OVER THE STAMMING-GROUND.





POPOLAC STARED, WITH A THOUSAND EYES, AT THE RUINS OF ITS RITUAL ENEMY, THEN STAGGERED BACK FROM THE SIGHT, ITS ARMS FLAILING THE AIR, BUT IT KEPT ITS BALANCE, EVEN AS A COMMON INSANITY, WOKEN BY THE HORROR AT ITS FEET, SURGED THROUGH ITS SINNERS AND CURPLED ITS BRAIN.

THE ORDER WENT OUT: THE BODY THRASHED AND TWISTED AND TURNED FROM THE GRISLY CASSET OF POPOLAC, AND FLEW INTO THE HILLS.



AS IT HEADED INTO OBLIVION, ITS TOWERING FORM PASSED BETWEEN THE CAR AND THE SUN, THROWING ITS COLD SHADOW OVER THE BLOODY ROAD. MICK SAW NOTHING THROUGH HIS TEARS, AND JUDE'S EYES NARROWED AGAINST THE SIGHT HE FEARED SEEING AROUND THE NEXT BEND. ONLY DAILY REGISTERED THAT SOMETHING HAD BLOTTED THE LIGHT FOR A MINUTE.

A CLOUD, PERHAPS. A FLOCK OF BIRDS.

HAD HE LOOKED UP AT THAT MOMENT, JUST STOLEN A GLANCE OUT TOWARDS THE NORTH-EAST, HE WOULD HAVE SEEN POPOLAC'S HEAD, THE VAST SWARMING HEAD OF A MADDENED CITY, DISAPPEARING BELOW HIS LINE OF VISION AS IT MARCHED INTO THE HILLS. HE WOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT THIS TERRITORY WAS BEYOND HIS COMPREHENSION, AND THAT THERE WAS NO HEALING TO BE DONE IN THIS CORNER OF HELL.

BUT HE DIDN'T SEE THE CITY, AND HE AND MICK'S LAST TURNING POINT HAD PASSED. FROM NOW ON, LIKE POPOLAC AND ITS DEAD THIN, THEY WERE LOST TO SANITY, AND TO ALL HOPE OF LIFE.

THEY ROUNDED THE BEND AND THE RUINS OF POPOLAC CAME INTO SIGHT. THEIR DOMESTICATED IMAGINATIONS HAD NEVER CONCEIVED OF A SIGHT SO UNSPEAKABLY BRUTAL.

PERHAPS IN THE BATTLEFIELDS OF EUROPE AS MANY CORPSES HAD BEEN HEALED TOGETHER, BUT HAD SO MANY OF THEM BEEN WOMEN AND CHILDREN, LOCKED TOGETHER WITH THE CORPSES OF MEN?

THERE HAD BEEN PILES OF DEAD AS HIGH, BUT EVER SO MANY SO RECENTLY ABUNDANT WITH LIFE.



THERE HAD BEEN CITIES LAID WASTE AS QUICKLY, BUT EVER AN ENTIRE CITY LOST TO THE SINGLE PICTURE OF DEATH.

IT WAS A SIGHT BEYOND SICKNESS, IN THE FACE OF IT, THE MIND SLOWED TO A GAULE PACE, THE FORCES OF REASON PICKED OVER THE EVIDENCE WITH METICULOUS HANDS, SEARCHING FOR A FLAW IN IT, A PLACE WHERE IT COULD SAY: THIS IS NOT HAPPENING, THIS IS A DREAM OF DEATH, NOT DEATH ITSELF.

BUT REASON COULD FIND NO WEAKNESS IN THE WALL, THIS WAS TRUE. IT WAS DEATH INDEED.

PODULTEVO HAD FALLEN.



THIRTYEIGHT THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED AND SIXTYFIVE CITIZENS WERE SPREAD ON THE GROUND, OR RATHER FLUNG IN UNSAINLY SEEPING PILES. THERE WOULD BE NO SURVIVORS FROM THAT CITY EXCEPT A FEW ONLOOKERS--THE CRIPPLED THE SICK, THE ANCIENT--WHO HAD TRISPIRED OUT OF THEIR HOMES TO WATCH THE CONTEST.



JUDD SURVEYED THE CARNAGE: NO SIGN OF A PLANE CRASH, NO FIRE, NO SMOKE, NO FUEL.



THE CLOSER HE LOOKED THE MORE HE SAW OF THE EXTRAORDINARY SYSTEM OF KNOTS AND LASHINGS THAT STILL HELD THE BODIES TOGETHER. ALL WERE IN SOME WAY CONNECTED UP WITH THEIR FELLOWS, TIED TOGETHER AS THOUGH IN SOME INSANE COLLECTIVE BONDAGE GAME.







IN POPOLAC A KIND OF PEACE
RESIGNED, INSTEAD OF A FRENZY
OF PANIC THERE WAS A NUMBNESS,
A SHEEPLIKE ACCEPTANCE OF THE
WORLD AS IT WAS.

LOCKED IN THEIR POSITIONS, STRAPPED
ROPE AND HARNESSED TO EACH OTHER IN A
LIVING SYSTEM THAT ALLOWED FOR NO SINGLE
VOICE TO BE LOUDER THAN ANY OTHER, NOR
ANY RACE TO LAUGH LESS THAN ITS NEIGHBORS.
THEY LET AN INSANE CONSENSUS REPLACE
THE TRANQUIL VOICE OF REASON.

THEY WERE CONVULSED
INTO ONE MIND, ONE
THOUGHT, ONE ACTION.
THEY BECAME, IN THE
SPACE OF A FEW
MOMENTS, THE SINGLE-
MINDED GIANT WHOSE
WINGS THEY HAD SO
BRILLIANTLY RECREATED.

THE ILLUSION OF PETTY INDIVIDUALITY
WAS SWIFT AWAY IN AN IRRESIST-
IBLE TIDE OF COLLECTIVE
FEELING--NOT A MAN'S PASSION,
BUT A TELEPATHIC SURGE THAT
DISSOLVED THE VOICES OF
THOUSANDS INTO ONE IRRESIST-
IBLE COMMAND.

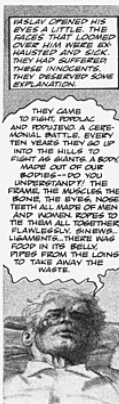
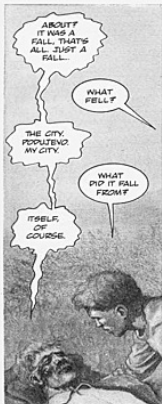
AND THE VOICE SAID: GO! THE
VOICE SAID: TAKE THIS HORRIBLE
SIGHT AWAY, WHERE I NEED
NEVER SEE IT AGAIN.
POPOLAC TURNED AWAY INTO
THE HILLS, ITS LEGS TAKING
STRIDES HALF A MILE LONG.

EACH MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD IN THAT
SEETHING TOWER WAS SILENT. THEY SAW
ONLY THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CITY. THEY
WERE THOUGHTLESS, BUT TO THINK THE CITY'S
THOUGHTS, AND THEY BELIEVED THEMSELVES
DEATHLESS, IN THEIR LUNGEING,
RELENTLESS STRENGTH, FAST AND MAD AND
DEATHLESS.



TWO MILES ALONG THE ROAD MICK AND JUPP SMELT PETROL IN THE AIR. A LITTLE FURTHER ON THEY CAME UPON THEIR CAR.

AND THE DRIVER...



WHETHER THE MAN HAD CHOSEN TO TELL A FANTASTIC LIE AS HE DIED, OR WHETHER THIS STORY WAS IN SOME WAY TRUE, MICK FELT USELESS IN THE FACE OF IT. HIS IMAGINATION WAS TOO NARROW TO ENCOMPASS THE IDEA. HIS BRAIN ACHED WITH THE THOUGHT OF IT, AND HIS COMPASSION CRACKED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF MISERY HE FELT.

THEY STOOD ON THE ROAD WHILE THE CLOUDS SCIPPED BY THEIR VAHUE, GREY SHAPONS PASSING OVER THEM TOWARDS THE ENIGMATIC HILLS.

IT WAS TWILIGHT.

POPOLAC COULD STRIDE NO FURTHER. IT FELT EXHAUSTION IN EVERY MUSCLE. HERE AND THERE IN ITS HUGE ANATOMY DEATHS HAD OCCURRED, BUT THERE WERE NO SURVIVORS IN THE CITY FOR ITS DECEASED CELLS. IF THE DEAD WERE IN THE INTERIOR, THE CORPSES WERE ALLOWED TO HANG FROM THEIR HARB NECKERS. IF THEY FORMED THE SKIN OF THE CITY THEY WERE UNBUCKLED FROM THEIR POSITIONS AND RELEASED TO PLUNGE INTO THE FOREST BELOW.

THE GIANT WAS NOT CAPABLE OF PITY. IT HAD NO AMBITION BUT TO CONTINUE UNTIL IT CEASED.

AS THE SUN SLUNK OUT OF SIGHT POPOLAC RESTED THE STARS WERE COMING OUT, WITH THEIR FAMILIAR CAUTION. NIGHT WAS APPROACHING, MERCIFULLY BANDAISING UP THE WOUNDS OF THE DAY, BLINDING EYES THAT HAD SEEN TOO MUCH.

POPOLAC ROSE TO ITS FEET AGAIN, AND BEGAN TO MOVE, STEP BY BOOMING STEP. IT WOULD NOT BE LONG SURELY BEFORE FATHURS OVERCAME IT, BEFORE IT COULD LIE DOWN IN THE TOMB OF SOME LOST VALLEY AND DIE.

BUT FOR A SPACE YET IT MUST WALK ON, EACH STEP MORE ABORTIVELY SLOW THAN THE LAST.

MICK WANTED TO BURY THE CAR THIEF SOMEWHERE ON THE EDGE OF THE FOREST. JUPP, HOWEVER, POINTED OUT THAT BURYING A BODY MIGHT SEEM, IN TOMORROW'S SANEER LIGHT, A LITTLE SUSPICIOUS.

AND RESIDES, WASN'T IT ABSURD TO CONCERN THEMSELVES WITH ONE CORPSE WHEN THERE WERE LITERALLY THOUSANDS OF THEM LYING A FEW MILES FROM WHERE THEY STOOD?

THE BODY WAS LEFT TO LIE, AND THE CAR TO SINK DEEPER INTO THE MUD.

WHAT DID HE MEAN—ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT GIANTS?

HE WAS TALKING METAPHOR—SOME TERTSANYOT TRIPS.

HE WAS DYING I THINK THERE WAS SOME TRUTH IN WHAT HE SAID?

THAT'S ABSURD THAT'S RIDICULOUS. NO.

ABOUT ELEVEN O'CLOCK, THEY SAW THE GLOW OF A WINDOW IN THE DISTANCE.

THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR OF THE STONE COTTAGE DIDN'T SMILE, BUT SHE UNDERSTOOD THEIR CONDTION AND LET THEM IN. THERE SEEMED TO BE NO PURPOSE IN TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO EITHER THE WOMAN OR HER CLEFTED HUSBAND WHAT THEY HAD SEEN WITH MIMES AND FACE-PULLINGS THEY EXPLAINED THAT THEY WERE HUNGRY AND EXHAUSTED.

THE COTTAGE HAD NO TELEPHONE, AND THERE WAS NO SIGN OF A VEHICLE, SO EVEN HAD THEY FOUND SOME WAY TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES, NOTHING COULD BE DONE.

THE FOOD WAS GOOD. IT BUOYED THEIR SPIRITS.

THEY WOULD SLEEP UNTIL MORNING AND THEN BEGIN THE LONG TREK BACK BY DAWN. THE BODIES IN THE FIELD WOULD BE BEING QUANTIFIED, IDENTIFIED, PARCELLED UP AND DISPATCHED TO THEIR FAMILIES.

THE AIR WOULD BE FULL OF REASSURING NOISES, CANCELLING OUT THE MOANS THAT STILL RANG IN THEIR EARS. THERE WOULD BE HELICOPTERS, LOOPY LADS OF MEN ORGANIZING THE CLEANING-UP OPERATIONS, ALL THE RITES AND PARAPHERNALIA OF A CIVILIZED DISASTER.

AND IN A WHILE, IT WOULD BE PALATABLE. IT WOULD BECOME PART OF THEIR HISTORY, A TRAGEDY, OF COURSE, BUT ONE THEY COULD EXPLAIN, CLASSTIFY AND LEARN TO LIVE WITH. ALL WOULD BE WELL. YES, ALL WOULD BE WELL. COME MORNING.

FOR NOW, THEY LAY WHERE THEY HAD FALLEN. THEY KNEW NOTHING, DREAMT NOTHING, FELT NOTHING.

THEN THE THUNDER BEGAN.

IN THE EARTH, IN THE DEEP EARTH, A RHYTHMICAL TREAD AS OF A TITAN, THAT CAME, BY DEGREES, CLOSER AND CLOSER.



THEY LISTENED TO THE NIGHT-HILLS ECHO BACK AND FORTH WITH THE SOUND. THERE WAS NO LIGHTNING TO ACCOMPANY THE THUNDER.

THE WIFE'S EYES WERE NOT GOOD, AND SHE DOUBTED WHAT SHE SAW WHEN THE BLACKNESS OF THE HILL CHANGED SHAPE AND REARED UP TO BLOCK THE STARS.



BUT HER HUSBAND HAD SEEN IT TOO: THE UNIMAGINABLY, HUGE HEAD, VASTER IN THE RECEIVING DARKNESS, LOOMING UP AND UP, PHARFING THE HILLS THEMSELVES WITH AMENITY.



MICK WOKE WITH A START. HE KNEW THE NOISE THAT SOUNDED IN HIS SUBSTANCE: THAT EARTH-THUNDER.



KRAH
BOOM
WHA--?

THE COTTAGE SHOOK. PLATES DANCED AND SMASHED OFF THE DRESSER. A CLAY PIPE ROLLED FROM THE MANTELPIECE AND SHATTERED IN THE ASHES OF THE HEARTH.



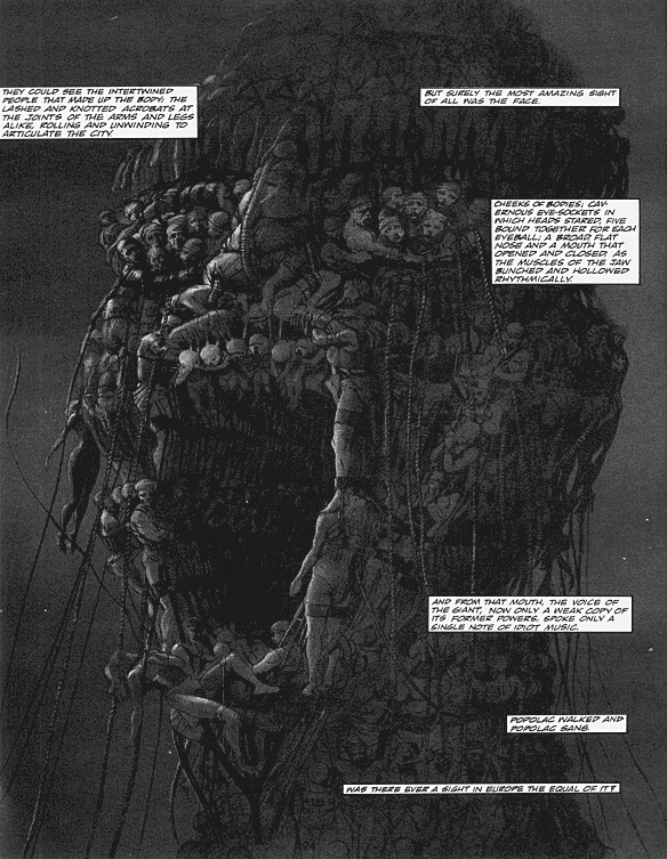
YOU SEET
SEET SEET

MYSTERYA BUBBLED
IN HIS NOSE.

THERE WAS A PLACE THAT SHOWED NO STARS. IT WAS A DARKNESS IN THE SHAPE OF A MAN, A VAST, BROAD HUMAN FRAME, A COLLOSSUS THAT REARED UP TO MEET HEAVEN. IT WAS NOT QUITE A PERFECT GIANT, ITS OUTLINE WAS NOT TIDY, IT REETHEED AND SWARMED.



EVERYTHING THAT THE GARTHIEF HAD SAID WAS TRUE. POPOLAC WAS A CITY AND A GIANT, AND IT HAD GONE INTO THE HILLS...



THEY COULD SEE THE INTERTWINED PEOPLE THAT MADE UP THE BODY; THE LASHED AND KNOTTED ACROBATS AT THE JOINTS OF THE ARMS AND LEGS ALIKE; ROLLING AND UNWINDING TO ARTICULATE THE CITY.

BUT SURELY THE MOST AMAZING SIGHT OF ALL WAS THE FACE.

CHEEKS OF BODIES; CAVERNOUS EYE-SOCKETS IN WHICH HEADS STARED; FIVE ROUNDED TOGETHER FOR EACH EYEBALL; A BROAD FLAT NOSE AND A MOUTH THAT OPENED AND CLOSED AS THE MUSCLES OF THE JAW BUNCHED AND HOLLOWED RHYTHMICALLY.

AND FROM THAT MOUTH, THE VOICE OF THE GIANT, NOW ONLY A WEAK COPY OF ITS FORMER POWERS, SPOKE ONLY A SINGLE NOTE OF IDIOT MUSIC.

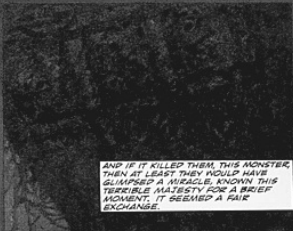
POPOLAC WALKED AND POPOLAC SANG.

WAS THERE EVER A SIGHT IN EUROPE THE EQUAL OF IT?

THE ENGLISHMEN REMAINED WHERE THEY STOOD. NEITHER DREAD NOR HORROR TOUCHED THEM NOW, JUST AN AWE THAT ROOTED THEM TO THE SPOT.



THEY KNEW THIS WAS A SIGHT THEY COULD NEVER HOPE TO SEE AGAIN; THIS WAS THE APEX—AFTER THIS THERE WAS ONLY COMMON EXPERIENCE. BETTER TO STAY THEN, THOUGH EVERY STEP BROUGHT DEATH NEARER; BETTER TO STAY AND SEE THE SIGHT WHILE IT WAS STILL THERE TO BE SEEN.



AND IF IT KILLED THEM, THIS MONSTER, THEN AT LEAST THEY WOULD HAVE GLIMPSED A MIRACLE, KNOWN THIS TERRIBLE MAJESTY FOR A BRIEF MOMENT. IT SEEMED A FAIR EXCHANGE.

THE STEP THAT TROD THE COTTAGE CAME SOONER THAN THEY THOUGHT.



IN A MATTER OF SECONDS IT WAS REDUCED TO SPLINTERS, DUST, AND FLYING DEBRIS.



IN HIS HEAD, JUDD HEARD THE KILLING STROKE LIKE A BALL HITTING A WALL: A PLAY-YARD DEATH. NO PAIN, NO REMORSE, OUT LIKE A LIGHT, A TINY, INSIGNIFICANT LIGHT, HIS DEATH-CRY LOST IN THE PANDEMONIUM. HIS BODY HIDDEN IN THE SMOKE AND DARKNESS.



MICK NEITHER SAW NOR HEARD JUDD DIE.

MICK TOOK HIS CHANCE. HOWLING LIKE A BANSHÉE, HE RAN TOWARDS THE LEG, LONGING TO EMBRACE THE MONSTER TO REACH THE FOOT BEFORE IT WAS LIFTED AND HE WAS LEFT BEHIND.

VEEAGH!

HE MADE ONE LAST LUNGE AT THE LIMB AS IT BEGAN TO LEAVE THE GROUND, SNATCHING A HARKNESS OF A ROPE, OR HUMAN HAIR, OR FLESH ITSELF-- ANYTHING TO CATCH THIS PASSING MIRACLE AND BE PART OF IT.

BETTER TO GO WITH IT WHEREVER IT WAS GOING, SERVE IT IN ITS PURPOSE, WHATEVER THAT MIGHT BE. BETTER TO DIE WITH IT THAN LIVE WITHOUT IT.

SCREAMING HIS SHEER ECSTASY AT HIS SUCCESS, HE FELT THE GREAT LEG RAISED AND GLANCED DOWN THROUGH THE SWIRLING DUST TO THE SPOT WHERE HE HAD STOOD, ALREADY RECEIVING AS THE LIMB CLIMBED.

YA HAAA!

HE WAS A NITCH-HIKER WITH A GOD. THE MEAN LIFE HE HAD LEFT WAS NOTHING TO HIM NOW, OR EVER. HE WOULD LIVE WITH THIS THING, YES, HE WOULD LIVE WITH IT-- SEEING IT AND SEEING IT AND EATING IT WITH HIS EYES UNTIL HE DIED OF SHEER GLUTTONY.

BELOW, FAR BELOW, HE GUMPTED UP RAILS ON THE DARK GROUND, IRRETRIEVABLE LOVE AND LIFE AND SANITY WERE GONE, GONE LIKE THE MEMORY OF HIS NAME, OF HIS SEX, OR HIS AMATION.

IT ALL MEANT NOTHING NOTHING AT ALL.

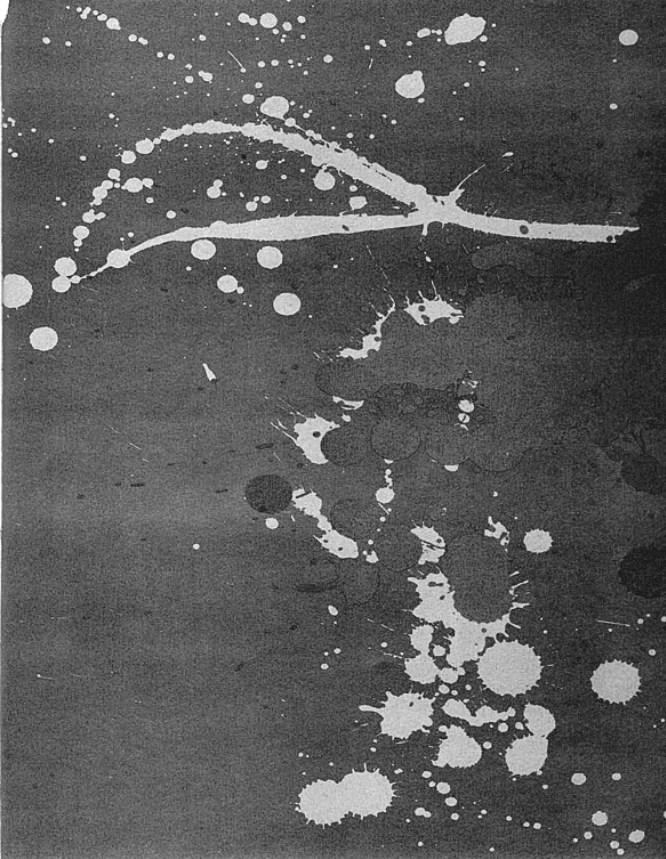
POPELAC WALKED, THE NOISE OF ITS STEPS RECEIVING TO THE EAST, POPELAC WALKED THE HUM OF ITS VOICE LOST IN THE NIGHT.

AFTER A DAY, BIRDS CAME, FOXES CAME, FLIES, BUTTERFLIES, WASPS CAME, JUPP MOVED, JUPP SHIFTED, JUPP GAVE BIRTH, IN HIS BELLY MAGGOTS WARMED THEMSELVES, IN A VIXEN'S DEN THE GOOD FLESH OF HIS THIGH WAS FOUGHT OVER.

AFTER THAT, IT WAS QUICK. THE BONES YELLOWING, THE BONES CRUMBLING, SOON AN EMPTY SPACE WHICH HE HAD ONCE FILLED WITH BREATH AND ONIONS.

DARKNESS, LIGHT, DARKNESS, LIGHT, HE INTERRUPTED NEITHER WITH HIS NAME.

The End



**Other Books by
Clive Barker**

**The Great And Secret Show
Cabal**

Weaveworld

The Damnation Game

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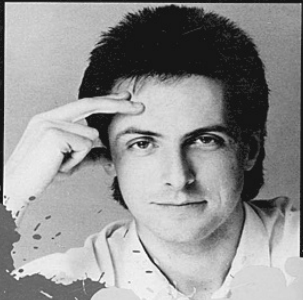
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